THE CONNOISSEUR

Books by

WALTER DE LA MARE

In Verse

POEMS (*out of print*)
THE LISTENERS AND OTHER POEMS
MOTLEY AND OTHER POEMS
FLORA
POEMS: 1901–1918
THE VEIL AND OTHER POEMS
SONGS OF CHILDHOOD
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A CHILD'S DAY
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AN ANTHOLOGY WITH NOTES

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THE RIDDLE AND OTHER TALES
MEMOIRS OF A MIDGET
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The CONNOISSEUR

AND OTHER STORIES

by WALTER de la MARE

Robert A. O'Dea

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CONTENTS

Mr. Kempe	3
Missing	40
The Connoisseur	86
Disillusioned	117
The Nap	147
Pretty Poll	174
All Hallows	200
The Wharf	244
The Lost Track	264

The Connoisseur

and Other Stories

Mr. Kempe

T was a mild, clammy evening; and the swing-door of the tap-room stood wide open. The brass oil-lamp suspended from the rafter had not yet been lit; a small misty drizzle was drifting between the lime-washed walls and the over-arching trees on the further side of the lane; and from my stool at the counter I could commune—as often as I felt inclined—with the wild white eye of the Blue Boar which fleered in at the window from the hanging sign.

Autumnal scents, failing day, rain so gentle and persistent—such phenomena as these have a slightly soporific effect on the human consciousness. It is as though its busy foreground first becomes blurred, then blotted out; and then—the slow steady sweep of the panorama of dream that never ceases its strange motioning. The experience is brief, I agree. The footlights, headlights, skylights brighten again: the panorama retires!

Excluding the landlady, who occasionally waddled in from her dusky retreat behind the bar, there were only three of us in the tap-room—three chance customers now met together for the first time: myself; a smallish man with an unusually high crown to his head, and something engagingly monkey-like in his face; and a barrel-shaped person who sat humped up on a stool between us in an old

shooting-jacket and leather leggings, his small eyes set close together on either side a red nose.

I had been the last to put in an appearance, but had not, it seemed, damped anything in the nature of a conversation. Such weather does not conduce to it. But three may be some sort of company where two is none; and what, at last, set us more or less at our ease was an "automatic machine" that stood in the corner of the tap-room under a coloured lithograph of Shotover, the winner of the Derby in 1882. It was a machine of an unusual kind since it gave its patronisers nothing tangible for their penny—not even their ladylove on a slip of cardboard, or a clinging jet of perfume.

It reminds me now of the old Miracle plays or Moralities. Behind its glass it showed a sort of grotto, like a whited sepulchre, with two compartments, over which descended the tresses of a weeping willow. You slipped a penny into the slot, and presently a hump-backed mommet in a rusty-black cowl jerked into view from the cell on the left. He stood there a moment in the midst—fixedly looking at you: then decamped into the gloom again.

But this was if your luck was out—or so I assumed. If it was in, then a nymph attired in skirts of pink muslin wheeled out of the flowery bower on the eastern side; and danced a brief but impassioned *pas seul*.

My three pennies had brought me one fandango from the latter and two prolonged scrutinies from the former —a proportion decided on, no doubt, by the worldly-wise manufacturer of the machine. But this was not all. In intention at least he must have been a practical optimist. For if the *nymph* responded to your penny, you were invited to slip yet another coin into another slot—but before

you could count ten. This galvanised the young lady into a giddy pursuit of the numbskull in the black hood—a pursuit, however, which ended merely in the retirement of them both behind the scenes.

The man in leggings had watched my experiments with eyes almost as motionless as plums in a pudding. It was my third penny that had wooed out the nymph. But the "grandfather's clock" in the corner had ticked loudly at least five times before I managed to insert a fourth. It was a moment of rapt—of an aching—excitement. What a teeming passion showed itself in that wild horse-play behind the glass! And then, alas, the machinery ceased to whirr; the clock ticked on; the faint rustle of the drifting rain sounded once more at the open door; I returned to my stool; and the landlady retired into her den.

"Bang goes fourpence," I remarked a little sheepishly. "Still, mine was about the right average, I suppose."

The man in the leather leggings—as if the problem were not for *his* solution—at once turned his little eyes towards our companion in the corner, whose face was still wreathed with the friendliest of grimaces at my efforts.

"Well, now," he took me up, "I'm not so sure. In my view, that minx there sidles out too often. Most young men and more old ones would be content with once in six. I would myself. It's our credulity. We live on hopes, however long they may be deferred. We *live,* as you might say; but how many of us learn? How many of us want to make sure?" He paused for an answer: his small eyes fixed in his face. "Not one in a million," he decided.

I stole another look into the narrow darkness of the Young Lady's Bower.

"Oh," he interrupted, "I wasn't thinking merely of the 'eternal feminine,' as they call it. That's only one of the problems; though even an answer to that might be interesting. There's Free Will, for example; there's Moral Responsibility; and such little riddles as where we all come from and where we are going to. Why, we don't even know what we are—in ourselves, I mean. And how many of us have tried to find out?"

The man in leggings withdrew his stare and groped out a hand towards his pint-pot. "Have you?" he enquired.

The dark-eyed, wizened face lit up once more with its curiously engaging smile. "Well, you see, I was once a schoolmaster, and from an official point of view, I suppose, it is part of the job. To find answers, I mean. But, as you'll agree, we temporise; we compromise. On the other hand, I once met quite by chance, as we call it, a man who had spent I should guess a good many years on that last problem. All by himself, too. You might almost describe it as a kind of pilgrimage—though I'm not anxious to repeat it. It was my turn for a lesson."

"And what was *his* solution?" I inquired.

"Have you ever been to Porlock—the Weir?" the little man enquired.

I shook my head.

"I mention Porlock," he went on, "because if you had ever been there, the place I'm thinking of might perhaps call it to mind. Though mine was on a different scale—a decidedly different scale. I doubt, for example, if it will ever become one of those genial spots frequented by week-end tourists and *chars-à-banc*. In the days I'm speaking of—twenty years or more ago—there wasn't even the rudiments of an inn in the place. Only a beershop about

half the size of this tap-room, with a population to match —just a huddle of fishermen's cottages tucked in under the cliff.

"I was walking at the time, covering unfamiliar ground, and had managed to misread my map. My aim had been to strike into a cliff-path that runs more or less parallel with the coast; but I had taken the wrong turn at the cross-roads. Once astray, it seemed better manners to keep on. How can you tell what chance may have secreted in her sleeve, even when you don't put pennies in slots?

"I persuaded an old lady to give me tea at one of the cottages, and asked my way. Visitors were rare events, it seemed. At first she advised me to turn back; I couldn't do better than that. But after further questioning, she told me at last of a lower cliff track or path, some miles apparently this side of the one I had in view. She marked it out for me with her rheumatic old forefinger on the table-cloth. Follow this path far enough, I gathered, it would lead me into my right road at last.

"Not that she suggested my making the attempt. By no means. It was a matter of seven miles or more. And neither the natives of the village nor even chance visitors, it seemed, were tempted to make much use of this particular route."

"Why not?" enquired the man in leggings, and immediately coughed, as if he had thought better of it.

"That's what I am coming to," replied the schoolmaster —as though he had been lying in wait for the question. "You see my old lady had volunteered her last piece of information with a queerish look in her eyes—like some shy animal slipping into cover. She was telling me the truth, but not, I fancied, the whole truth.

"Naturally I asked what was wrong with the path; and was there anything of interest on the way or at the end of it—worth such a journey? Once more she took a long slow look at me, as if my catechism were rather more pressing than the occasion warranted. There *was* a something marked on the map, she had been given to understand—'just an old, ancient building, like.'

"Sure enough there was: though unfortunately, long wear of the one I carried had not only left indecipherable more than an old English letter or two of any record of it, but had rubbed off a square half-mile or so of the country round about it.

"It was proving a little irksome to draw Truth out of her well, and when innocently enough I asked if there was any one in charge of the place, the old lady was obviously disconcerted. She didn't seem to think it needed being taken charge of; though she confessed at last that a house 'not nearly so old, sir, you will understand,' stood near-by, in which lived a gentleman of the name of Kempe.

"It was easier sailing now that we had come to Mr. Kempe. The land, it appeared, including the foreshore —but apart from the chapel—had been in his family since the beginning of time. Mr. Kempe himself had formerly been in the church—conformist or otherwise—and had been something of a traveller, but had returned home with an invalid wife many years before.

"Mrs. Kempe was dead now; and there had been no children, 'none, at least, as you would say grew up to what might be called living.' And Mr. Kempe himself had not only been ailing for some little time, but might, for all my informant knew apparently, be dead himself.

Nevertheless, there was still a secretive look in the faded eyes—almost as if she believed Mr. Kempe had discovered little methods of his own against the onsets of mortality! Anyhow, she couldn't tell; nobody ever went that way now, so far as she was aware. There was the new road up above. What's more, tidings of Mr. Kempe's end, I gathered, however solitary, would not exactly put the village into mourning.

"It was already latish afternoon; and in that windless summer weather walking had been a rather arduous form of amusement. I was tired. A snowy low-pitched upper-room overlooking the sea was at my disposal if I wanted it for a night or two. And yet, even while I was following this good soul up her narrow staircase, I had already decided to push on in the direction of Mr. Kempe. If need be, I would come back that evening. Country people are apt to be discreet with strangers—however open in appearance. Those shrewd old eyes—when at least they showed themselves—had hinted that even with an inch to the mile a map-maker cannot exhaust a countryside. The contours, I had noticed, were unusual. Besides, Mr. Kempe was not less likely to be interesting company because he was a recluse.

"I put down five shillings on account for my room, and the kindly old creature laid them aside in an ornament on her mantelpiece. There they lie still, for all I know. I have never reclaimed them."

The man in leggings once more turned his large shapeless face towards the schoolmaster, but this time he made no audible comment.

"And did you find Mr. Kempe?" I enquired.

The schoolmaster smiled, looking more like a philan-

thropic monkey than ever. "I set out at once: watched by the old lady from her porch, until, with a wave of my hand for adieu, I turned out of the village street, and she was hidden from sight. There was no mistaking the path—even though it led off over a stile into a patch of stinging-nettles, and then past a boggy goose-pond.

"After a few hundred yards it began to dip towards the shore, keeping more or less level with the sea for a mile or so until it entered a neat and sandy cove—the refuge even in summer of all sorts of flotsam and sea-rubbish; and a positive maëlstrom, I should imagine, when the winter gales sweep in. Towards the neck of this cove the wheel-marks in the thin turf faded out, and the path meandered on for a while beside a brook and under some fine ash trees, then turned abruptly to the right, and almost due north. The bleached bows of a tarred derelict boat set up on end and full of stones—*The Orion*—was my last touch with civilisation.

"It was a quiet evening; the leaves and grasses shone green and motionless, the flowers standing erect on their stalks under the blue sky, as if carved out of wax. The air was uncommonly sweet, with its tang of the sea. Taking things easy like this, it was well worth while to be alive. I sat down and rested, chewing a grass-stalk and watching the friendly lapping sea. Then up and on.

"After about an hour's steady walking, the path began once more to ascend. It had by now led shorewards again, though I was softly plodding on out of sight and all but out of sound of the tide. Dense neglected woods rose on either side of me, and though wherever the sun could pierce in there were coverts in plenty, hardly a cry of insect or bird stirred the air. To all intents I might

have been exploring virgin country. Now and again indeed the fallen bole of a tree or matted clumps of bramble, briony, and traveller's joy compelled me to make a widish detour. But I was still steadily ascending, and the view tended at length to become more and more open; with here and there a patch of bright green turf and a few scrub bushes of juniper or sprouting tamarisk.

"Shut in as I had been, until this moment it had been difficult to guess how far above me the actual plateau lay, or precisely how far below, the sea—though I had caught distant glimpses now and again of its spreading silver and the far horizon. Even at this point it would have been flattery to call the track a path. The steeper its incline, the more stony and precarious became one's footing. And then at last I rounded the first of a series of bluffs or headlands, commanding a spectacular view of the coast behind me, though nothing of what lay in front.

"The tiny village had vanished. About a hundred and fifty feet beneath the steep on whose margin I was standing—with a flaming bush of gorse here and there, and an occasional dwarf oak as gray as silk in the evening light —the incoming tide gently mumbled against its rocks, rocks of a peculiar patchy green and black.

"I took another look at my map, enjoyed a prolonged 'breather,' and went on. Steadily up and inward now and almost due north-west. And once more untended thickets rose dense on either side, and the air was oppressed with a fragrance sickly as chloroform. Some infernal winter tempest or equinoctial gale must have lately played havoc here. Again and again I had to clamber over the bole or through the head-twigs of monster trees felled by the wind, and still studded with a few sprouting *post-*

mortem pale-green buds. It was like edging between this world and the next.

"Apart, too, from the gulls with their saturnine gabbling, and flights of clanging oyster-catchers on the rocks below, what birds I saw were birds of prey: buzzards and kestrels chiefly, suspended as if by a thread from space, their small heads stooping between their quivering wings. And once I overheard what I took to be the cough of a raven to its mate. About twenty minutes afterwards, my second bluff hove into sight. And I paused for a while, staring at it.

"For ordinary purposes I have a fairly good head. And yet I confess that before venturing further I took a prolonged look at this monster and at the faint patternings of the path that lay before me, curving first in, then out, along and across the face of the cliff, and just faintly etching its precipitous surface as it edged out of sight. It's a foolish thing perhaps to imagine oneself picked out clean against the sky on a precipitous slope—if, that is, you mean to put the fancy into action. You get a sort of double-barrelled view of your mortal body crouching there semi-erect, little better than a framework of bones.

"Not that there was as yet any positive risk or danger. The adventure would have been child's play, no doubt, even for an amateur mountaineer. You had only to pick your way, keeping a sharp eye on the loose stones, and—to avoid megrims—skirting round the final curve without pausing to look up or to look down. A modest man might possibly try all fours. Still, after that, it did not surprise me to remember that visitors to these parts had usually preferred some other method of reaching the road and country up above. Pleasure may be a little *over*-spiced with excitement."

"Steep, eh?" ejeculated the man in leggings.

"Yes, steep," replied the schoolmaster; "though taken as mere scenery," he continued, "there was nothing to find fault with. Leagues and leagues of sea stretched out to the vague line of the horizon like an immense plate, mottled green and blue. A deep pinkish glow, too, had begun to spread over the eastern skies, mantling up into heights of space made the more abysmal in appearance by wisps of silver cirrus.

"Now and again I lay back with my heels planted on what was left of the path, and rested a moment, staring up into that infinity. Now and again I all but decided to go back. But sheer curiosity to see the mysterious hermitage of which I had heard, and possibly the shame of proving myself yet another discredited visitor, lured me on. Solitude, too, is like deepening water to a swimmer: that also lures you on. Except for an occasional bloated, fork-tailed, shrimp-like insect that showed itself when a flake of dislodged stone went scuttering down into the abyss below, I was the only living creature abroad. Once more I pushed cautiously forward. But it was an evil-looking prospect, and the intense silence of the evening produced at last a peculiar sense of unreality and isolation. My universe seemed to have become a mere picture —and I out of place in it. It was as if I had been mislaid and forgotten.

"I hung by now, I suppose, about two or three hundred feet above the sea; and maybe a hundred or so beneath the summit of the wall which brushed my left elbow. Wind-worn boulders, gently whispered over by saplings of ash or birch, jutted shallowly here and there above and below me. Marine plants lifted their wind-bitten flowers

from inch-wide ledges on which their seeds had somehow found a lodging. The colours mirrored in sky and water increased in brilliance and variety as the sunset advanced, though here was only its reflection; and the flat ocean beneath lapped soundlessly on; its cream-like surf fringing here and there the very base of the cliff, beneath which, like antediluvian monsters, vast rocks lay drowsing. I refrained from examining them too closely.

"But even if—minute intrusive mote that I was, creeping across the steep of wall—even if I had been so inclined, there was little opportunity. Though for centuries wind, frost and rain had been gnawing and fretting to some purpose at the face of the cliff, sure foothold and finger-hold became ever more precarious. An occasional ringing reverberation from far below suggested, too, that even the massive bulk of rock itself might be honeycombed to its foundations. What once had been a path was now the negation of one. And the third prodigious bluff towards which I presently found myself slowly, almost mechanically, advancing, projected into space as a knife-like angle; cut sharp in gigantic silhouette against the skies.

"I made a bewildering attempt to pretend to be casual and cheerful—even to whistle. But my lips were dry, and breath or courage failed me. None the less I had contrived to approach within twenty yards or so of that last appalling precipice, when, as if a warning voice had whispered the news in my ear, I suddenly realised the predicament I was in. To turn back now was impossible. Nor had I a notion of what lay on the further side of the headland. For a few instants my bones and sinews rebelled against me, refusing to commit themselves to the

least movement. I could do no more than cling spasmodically with my face to the rock.

"But to hang there on and on and wither like an autumnal fly was out of the question. One single hour of darkness, one spinning puff of wind, would inevitably dislodge me. But darkness was some hours distant; the evening was of a dead calm; and I thanked my stars there was no sun to roast and confuse me with his blaze and heat. I thanked my stars—but where would my carcass be when those stars began to show themselves in the coming night? All this swept through my mind in an instant. Complete self-possession was the one thing needful. I realised that too. And then a frightful cold came over me; sweat began to pour off my body; the very soul within me became sick with fear.

"I use the word soul because this renewed nausea was something worse than physical. I was a younger man then, and could still in the long run rely on nerve and muscle, but fear turns one's blood to water—that terror of the spirit, and not merely of the mind or instinct. It bides its moment until the natural edges off into—into the unknown.

"Not that Nature, as we call her, even in the most congenial surroundings, is the sort of old family nurse that makes one's bed every morning, and tucks one up with a 'God bless you' overnight. Like the ants and aphides and the elvers and the tadpoles, she produces us humans in millions; leaving us otherwise to our own devices. We can't even guess what little stratagems for the future she may be hiding up her sleeve. We can't even guess. But that's a mere commonplace. After all, so far as we can prove, she deserves only a small 'n' to her name.

"What I'm suggesting is merely that though she appeared to have decoyed me into this rat-trap with all her usual artlessness, she remained a *passive* enemy, and what now swathed me in like a breath of poison—as, with face, palms, knees and belly pressed close against the rock, I began once more working softly on from inch-wide ledge and inch-deep weed, my tongue like tinder, my eyes seeming to magnify every glittering atom they tried to focus—was the consciousness of some power or influence beyond Nature's. It was not so much of death—and I actually with my own eyes *saw* my body inertly hurtling to its doom beneath—that I was afraid. What terrified me beyond words to express was some positive presence here in a more desperate condition even than I. I was being waylaid.

"When you come to such a pass as this, you lose count of time. I had become an automaton—little better than a beetle obeying the secret dictates of what I believe they call the Life-Urge; and how precisely I contrived to face and to circumnavigate that last bit of precipice, I cannot recall. But this once done, in a few minutes I was in comparative safety. I found myself sluggishly creeping again along a path which had presently widened enough to allow me to turn my face outwards from the rock, and even to rest. And even though the precipice beneath me was hardly less abrupt and enormous, and the cliff-face above actually overhung my niche, for the time being I was out of physical danger. I was, as they say, my own man again; had come back.

"It was high time. My skull seemed to have turned to ice; I was wet through; my finger-nails were split; my

hands covered with blood; and my clothes would have disgraced a tramp.

"But all trace of fear had left me, and what now swept my very wits away in this almost unendurable reaction was the sheer beauty of the scene that hung before my eyes. Half reclining, not daring yet to stir, my outstretched hands clasping two knobs of rocks, my eyeballs gently moving to and fro, I sat there and feasted on the amazing panorama spread out before me; realising none the less that I was in the presence of something—how can I express it?—of something a little different from, stranger and less human than—well, our old friend Nature.

"The whole face of this precipice was alight with colour—dazzling green and orange, drifts of snow and purple—campion, sea-pink, may-weed, samphire, camomile, lichen, stonecrop, with fleshy and aromatic plants that I knew not even the names of, sweeping down drift beyond drift into a narrow rock-bound tranquil bay of the darkest emerald and azure, and then sweeping up once more drift beyond drift into the vault of the sky, its blue fretted over as if by some master architect with silvery interlacings, a scattered feather-like fleece of vapour.

"The steady cry too, possibly amplified by echo, of the incoming tide reached me here once more; a whisper and yet not toneless. And on and on into the distance swept the gigantic coast line, crowned summit to base with its emerald springtide woods.

"Still slightly intoxicated as I was by the terror and danger in which I had been, and which were now for the moment past and gone, I gave myself ample opportunity

to rest and to drink in this prodigious spectacle. And yet, as I lay there, still at a dizzy altitude, midway between sea and sky but in perfect safety, the odd conviction persisted, that though safe, I was not yet secure. It was as if I were still facing some peril of the mind, and absurd and irrational though it may sound there was a vague disquieting hint within me of disappointment—as if I had lost without realising it a unique opportunity. And yet, all this medley of hints and intuitions was wholly subsidiary to the conviction that from some one point in all this vacancy around me a steady devouring gaze was fixed on me—that I was being watched."

Once more our hard-headed friend fidgeted uneasily on his stool.

"It sounds absurd, I agree," the schoolmaster caught him up. "Simply because, apart from the seabirds and the clouds, I had been and was still the only moving object within view. The sudden apparition of me crawling around that huge nose of rock must have been as conspicuous as it was absurd. Besides, myriads of concealed eyes in the dense forest towering conically up on the other side of the narrow bay beneath me, and looming ever more mistily from headland to headland towards the north and west, could have watched my every movement. A thousand arrows from unseen archers concealed on the opposing heights might at any instant have transfixed me where I lay. One becomes conscious, too, of the sort of empty settled stare which fixes an intruder into such solitudes. It is at the same time vacant, enormous and hostile.

"But I don't mean that. I still mean something far more definite—and more dangerous, too, than that; and

I keep to it even if this precise memory may have been affected by what came after. For I was soon to learn that in actual fact I *was* being watched; and by as acute and unhuman a pair of eyes as I have ever seen in mortal head.

"With infinite caution I rose to my feet again at last, and continued my journey. The path grew steadily easier; soil succeeded to bare rock, and this must not very long before, I discovered, have been trodden by other human feet than mine. There were marks of hobnails between its tussocks of grass and moss and thrift.

"It presently descended a little, and then in a while, from out of the glare of the evening, I found myself entering a broader and heavily-shaded track leading straight onwards and tunnelling inland into the woods. It was, to my amazement, close on eight o'clock, and too late to dream of turning back, even if I could have persuaded myself to face again the experience of the last half-hour. Yet whatever curiosity might say for itself, I felt a peculiar disinclination to forge ahead. The bait had ceased to be enticing.

"I paused once more under the dismal funnel of greenery in which I found myself staring at the face of my watch, and then had another look at the map. A minute or two's scrutiny assured me that straight ahead was my only possible course. And why not? There was company ahead. In this damp soil the impressions of the hob-nailed shoes showed more clearly. Quite recently those shoes must have come and gone along this path on three separate occasions at least. Mine had been a rather acutely solitary excursion, and yet for the life of

me I had not the smallest desire to meet the maker of those footprints.

"In less than half-an-hour, however, I came to a standstill beneath 'the old, ancient building, like' that had once been marked on my map. And an uncompanionable sight it was. Its walls lay a little back from the green track in what appeared to be a natural clearing, or amphitheatre, though at a few yards distance huge pines, in shallow rising semi-circles, hemmed it in. In shape it was all but circular; and must once no doubt have been a wayside hermitage or cell. It was of stone and was surmounted by a conical roof of thick and heavy slabs, at the south side of which rose a minute bell-cote, and towards the east a stunted stone cross, with one of its arms broken away.

"The round arched door—its chevron edging all but defaced—refused to open. Nothing was to be seen in the gloom beyond its gaping keyhole. There was but one narrow slit of window, and this was beyond my reach. I could not even guess the age of this forbidding yet beautiful thing, and the gentleman—as I found afterwards—who had compiled the local guide-book had omitted to mention it altogether. Here and there in its fabric had begun to show itself, but clumsy efforts had been made at repair.

"In that deep dark verdurous silence, unbroken even by drone or twitter, the effect of those walls in their cold minute simplicity was peculiarly impressive. They seemed to strike a solemn chill into the air around them —those rain-stained senseless stones. And what looked like a kind of derelict burial-ground to the south side of

it only intensified its sinister aspect. No place surely for when the slow dark hours begin.

"The graves were very few in number, and only one name was decipherable on any of the uncouth and half-buried headstones. Two were mere mounds in the nibbled turf. I had drawn back to survey once more from this new aspect the walls beyond, when—from one instant to the next, so to speak—I became aware of the presence of Mr. Kempe. He was standing a few paces distant, his gaze in my direction—as unexpected an apparition as that of Banquo in *Macbeth*. Not even a robin could have appeared with less disturbance of its surroundings. Not a twig had snapped, not a leaf had rustled.

"He looked to be a man of about sixty or more, in his old greenish-black half-clerical garb, his trousers lapping concertina-like over immense ungainly boots. An antiquated black straw hat was on his head. From beneath it gray hair flowed out a little on either side the long colourless face with its straggling beard. His eyes were clear as water—the lids unusually wide apart—and they had the peculiarity, perceptible even at this distance, of not appearing to focus what their attention was fixed upon. That attention was fixed upon me as a matter of fact, and, standing as I was, with head turned in his direction, we so remained, closely regarding one another for what seemed to be a matter of hours rather than of moments.

"It was I who broke the silence with some affectedly-casual remark about the weather and the interestingness of the relic that stood, something like a huge mushroom

of stone, near-by. The voice that sounded in answer was even more astonishing than Mr. Kempe himself. It seemed to proceed from a throat rusty from want of use, and carried a kind of vibrant glassy note in it, like the clash of fine glass slightly cracked. At first I could not understand what he said. The sound of it reminds me now of Alexander Selkirk when his rescuers found him in Juan Fernandez. They said he spoke his words by halves, you'll remember. So did Mr. Kempe. They sounded like relics of a tongue as ancient as the unknown hermit's chapel beside which we had met.

"Still, I was myself as nervous as a cat. With all his oddities—those wide, colourless eyes, those gestures, that over-loud voice, there was nothing hostile, nothing even discourteous in his manner, and he did not appear to be warning me off as a trespasser. Indeed the finger wagging at me in the air was clearly beckoning me on. Not that I had any keen inclination to follow. I preferred to go on watching him, and attempted to mark time by once more referring to the age and architecture of the chapel —asked him at last pointblank if it were now too late to beg the courtesy of a glance inside.

"The evening light momentarily brightened above the dark spreading tops of the pines and struck down full on this queer shape with its engrossed yet vacant face. His eyes never faltered, their pin-prick pupils fixed in their almost hueless irises. Reflected thus, I seemed to be an object of an extremely limited significance—a mere speck floating in their intense inane. The eyes of the larger cats and the hawk-tribe have a similar effect; and yet one could hardly assert that their prey has no significance for *them!*

"He made no attempt to answer my questions, but appeared to be enquiring, in turn, how I had contrived to invade his solitude; what I wanted, in short. I was convinced none the less that he was deceiving me. He knew well how I had come: for, of course, meeting as we had, only one way had been possible—that from the sea.

"It might be impolitic to press the matter. I merely suggested that my journey had not been 'roses all the way,' that I must get back to the world above before nightfall; and once more gave him to understand my innocent purpose—the desire to examine this curious relic. His gaze wandered off to the stone hermitage, returned, and then as if in stealth, rested an instant intently on my hands. Otherwise he remained perfectly motionless: his long knotted fingers hanging down out of the sleeves of a jacket too short for his gaunt body and those ineffable clumsy rusty boots.

"The air in this green niche of the bay was stagnant with the scent of foliage and flowers; and so magically dark and clear it was as though you were in the presence of a dream. Or of a dreamer indeed—responsible not only for its beauty, but also for its menacing influence on the mind. All this, however, only convinced me the more of the necessity to keep my attention steadily fixed on the figure beside me. There was a something, an aura, about him difficult to describe. It was as if he himself were a long way off from his body—though that's pure nonsense, of course. As the phrase goes—he was not *all there*. Once more his eyes met mine, and the next thing that occurred to me was that I had never seen a human countenance that betrayed so desperate a hunger. But for what? It was impossible to tell.

"He was pressing me to follow him. I caught the word 'key'; and he at once led the way. With a prolonged reluctant look behind me—that antiquated cell of stone; those gigantic pines; the few sinking mounds clad in their fresh green turf—I turned in my tracks; and the glance he cast at me over his shoulder was intended, I gathered, as a smile of encouragement.

"The straggling gabled house to which he conducted me, with its low tower and smokeless chimneys now touched with the last cold red of sunset, was almost more windows than wall. The dark glass of their casements showed like water in its discoloured sides. Beyond it the ravine ascended ever more narrowly, and the house rested here in this green gap like a mummy long since deserted by its ghost.

"We crossed a cobbled courtyard, and Mr. Kempe preceded me up a wooden flight of stairs into a low-ceiled room with one all but ivy-blinded window, and, oddly enough, a stone floor. Except for the space where hung the faded portrait of what appeared to be a youngish woman, her hair dressed in ringlets, bookshelves covered the walls. Books lay hugger-mugger everywhere, indeed: on the table, on the chairs, on the floor, and even piled into the chimney of the rusty grate. The place was fusty with their leather bindings, and with damp.

"They had evidently been both well-used and neglected. There was little opportunity to get the general range of their titles—though a complete row of them I noticed were in Latin—because some vague intuition compelled me to keep my attention fixed upon my host. He had motioned me to a chair, and had seated himself on another that was already topped with two or three folios.

It must have been even at midday a gloomy room; and owing to its situation it was a dark house. The door having admitted us, stood open; beyond it yawned the silent staircase."

At this the schoolmaster paused; the landlady of the Blue Boar had once more emerged, and, like one man, we shamefacedly pushed our three glasses across the counter.

"And what happened then?" I enquired.

At this the man in leggings slightly turned his tortoise-like head in my direction, as if its usual resort was beneath a shell.

The schoolmaster watched the shape of the landlady till it had vanished into the dusk beyond. "Mr. Kempe began talking to me," he said. "Rapidly and almost incoherently at first, but gradually slowing down till I could understand more or less what he was saying. He was explaining, a little unnecessarily as I fancied, that he was a recluse; that the chapel was not intended for public worship; that he had few visitors; that he was a scholar and therefore was in need of little company but his books. He swept his long arm towards these companions of his leisure. The little light that silted through the window struck down across his tousled head, just touching his brow and cheekbones as he talked. And then in the midst of this harangue he suddenly came to an end, and asked me if I had been sent there. I assured him that I had come of my own free will, and would he oblige me before we returned to the chapel, with a glass of water. He hesitated.

"'Water?' he repeated. 'Oh, water?' And then with a peculiar gesture he crossed the room and shut the

door after him. His boots beat as hollowly on the stairs as sticks on a tom-tom. I heard the creaking of a pump-handle, and in a moment he reappeared carrying a blue-lined cup without a handle. With a glance at the portrait over my head, I drank its ice-cold contents at a gulp, and pushed the cup in between two dogs-eared books.

"'I want to get back to the road up above,' I explained.

"This seemed to reassure him. He shut his mouth and sat gazing at me. 'Ah! The road up above!'

"Then, 'Why?' he suddenly almost bawled at me, as if I were sitting a long way off. His great hands were clasped on his angled knees, his body bolt upright.

"'Why what?'

"'Why have you come here? What is there to spy out? This is private property. What do you do—for a living? What's the use of it all?'

"It was an unusual catechism—from stranger to stranger. But I had just escaped an unpleasant death, and could afford to be indulgent. Besides, he was years and years older than I. I told him that I was a schoolmaster, on vacation, not thinking it necessary to add that owing to a small legacy I was out of a job at the time. I said I was merely enjoying myself.

"'Enjoying yourself! And you teach!' he cried with a snap of his jaw. 'And what do you teach? Silly, suffocating lies, I suppose; or facts, as you prefer to call them.' He drew his hand down his long colourless face, and I stole a glance towards the door. 'If human beings *are* mere machines, well and good,' he went on. 'But supposing, my young friend, they are not mere machines? Supposing they have souls in their bodies: what then?

Supposing *you* have a soul in your body: what then? Ay, and the proof; the proof!'"

The schoolmaster's face puckered up once more into a genial smile.

"I won't attempt," he went on, "to repeat word for word the talk I had that evening. I can give only the gist of it. But I had stumbled pretty abruptly, you'll notice, on Mr. Kempe's King Charles's head. And he presented me with it on a charger. He was possessed, I gathered, by one single aim, thought and desire. All these years of his 'retirement' had apparently been spent in this one quest to prove Man's possession of 'Soul.' Certain doubts in my mind sprang up a little later in the evening, but it was clear from the beginning that in pursuit of this he had spared neither himself nor the wife that was gone. It was no less clear that he was entirely incapable of what better brains, no doubt, would have considered a scientific treatment of his theme.

"He thrust into my hand a few chapters of a foolscap manuscript that lay on the table—a fly-blown mirky pile of paper at least eighteen inches high. Never have I seen anything to which the term 'reading-*matter*' seemed more appropriate. The ink was faded on the top page; it was stained as if with tea. This work was entitled briefly, 'The Soul'—though the sub-title that followed it would not have disgraced the author of the 'Anatomy.'

"I could follow no more than a line or two at a time of the crazy hand-writing. The pages were heavily interscored, annotated and revised, not only in pencil but in violet and in red ink. A good part of it appeared to be in Latin and Hebrew, and other inactive tongues.

But turning them over at haphazard I caught such page-headings as 'Contemplation'; 'Dreams'; 'Flagellation'; 'Cadaver'; 'Infancy.' I replaced the sheets a little gingerly on the table; though one mustn't, of course, judge, of the merits of a work by the appearance of it in MS.

"The desolation of its author's looks and his abruptness of manner thinned away awhile as he warmed to his subject. But it was not so much his own sufferings in the cause as the thought of what Mrs. Kempe's last few years on earth must have been to her, that made me an attentive listener. Hers must indeed have proved a lingering death. He had never left her side, I gathered, for weeks at a time, except to tend his patch of garden, and to prepare their niggardly meals. And as her body had wasted, poor soul, his daily inquisition, his daily probings had become ever more urgent and desperate.

"There was no doubt in the world that this afflicted old man had loved his wife. The softening of the vacant inhuman eyes as he told me of that last deathbed colloquy was enough to prove that. Maybe it was in part because of this affection that mere speculation had sharpened into what they call an *idée fixe*. Still, I hardly think so. More probably the insidious germ had shared his cradle. And after all, some degree of conviction on the subject is not out of place in men of his cloth. He had abandoned his calling indeed, he was assuring me, solely as a proof of his zeal!

"He showed me also one or two late photographs of Mrs. Kempe—taken with his own antiquated camera, and 'developed' maybe in this very room. Soul indeed! There was little else. The face mirkily represented in

them wore a peculiar remote smile. The eyes had been hollowly directed towards the round leather cap of the machine. And so fallen were the features, now fading away on the discoloured paper, they might as well have been the presentment of a ghost.

"What precise proofs he had actually demanded of this companion of his hermitage I cannot even guess. And what proofs might he still be pleading for, pursuing? Evidently none as yet had satisfied his craving. But it was at least to his credit that his own personal experiments —experiments on himself, I mean—had been as drastic. In one of them I had unwittingly shared. For the cliff path, I discovered, had long been his constant penance. A catlike foot was concealed beneath those Brobdingnagian boots. His had been the hand that had not only helped Nature protect her fastnesses, but had kept off all but one or two occasional stragglers as fatuous as myself.

"It had been his haunt, this path—day and night. He questioned the idle heavens there. In the face of a peril so extreme the spirit wins almost to the point of severance from its earthly clay. Night and a half-moon and the northern constellations—I could at least in fancy share his vigils there. Only an occasional ship ventures into sight of that coast, but almost any day, it seemed, during these last few years a good spy-glass might have discerned from its decks a human shape facing the Infinite from that appalling eyrie.

"Both delusions and illusions, too, are rapid breeders. Which of the two, I wondered—still wonder—was *this* old man's conviction—the conviction, I mean, that one is likely to be more acutely conscious of the spirit within when the body is suspended, as it were, from the lintel of

death's door. What dreams may come in such circumstances every true-blue psychologist no doubt would merely pooh-pooh. Still, after all, Mr. Kempe had been something of a pioneer in this inquest. He had not spared himself. He could not live by faith, it seemed. He must indeed again and again have come uncommonly near dying in the pursuit of it.

"He had fasted moreover, and was now little more than a mere frame of bones within his outlandish clothes. Those boots of his—they kept forcing themselves on my attention—a worse fit than any worn by some homesick desperate soldier clambering 'over the top' in the Great War. They stuck in my mind.

" 'You don't seem to realise—you folk out there don't seem to realise' he suddenly began shouting at me, 'that nothing in this world is of the slightest importance compared with a Yes or No to what I ask. If we are nothing more than the brutes that perish—and no sign ever comes from them, I may tell you—then let us perish, I say. Let fire descend from Heaven and shrivel us up. I care not in what cataclysm of horror. I have passed them all. I am suggesting no blasphemy. I make no challenge; no denial—merely a humble plodder, my dear sir. But no! Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Not a word.' He lifted himself out of his chair, opened the door, looked out and came back again.

" 'I disapprove'—he brandished his outspread fingers at me—'I disapprove absolutely of peering and prying. Your vile pernicious interferences with the natural mysteries which we as humanity inherited from the old Adam —away with them! I declare I am a visitor here. I

declare that this'—he swept his hand down his meagre carcase,—'this is my mere tenancy. All that I seek in the simplest proof. A proof, that would not so much as stay a pulse-beat in the vile sceptics that give their wretched lives to what they call Science.

" 'I am not even a philosopher,' he ejaculated. 'I am here alone, a wayfaring man and a fool. Alone—in the face of this one supreme mystery. And I need aid!' His voice ceased; he threw out his hands and sat there emptily gazing at me.

"And so he continued. Now he would lift himself out of his chair and prowling from shelf to shelf, scanning at but an inch or two distant the titles of their contents, would thrust volume after volume into my hands for evidence, accompanying his clumsy motions with peevish and broken comments impossible to follow. I was presently surrounded with these things as with a surf.

"Then he would once more seat himself, and embark on a protracted harangue with that cracked disused voice rising steadily until it broke in a discordant screech of argument.

" 'Almighty God,' he yelled at me, 'you sit there, living, breathing, a human being; and the one justification of this hideous masquerade left uncertain.' He flung his hand into the air. 'What right has he even to share the earth with me!' he shouted into the quiet.

Then once more there followed as swift a return to silence, to self-possession—that intent devouring stare. One at least knows oneself to be something objective in any chance-encountered pair of human eyes. In his, as I have said already, I appeared to have no material exis-

tence whatsoever. Mr. Kempe might have been surveying, talking to his own shadow. It was peculiarly disconcerting.

"After yet another such outburst he had for a moment lain back in his chair as if exhausted. And I was so intent in my scrutiny of him that a second or two went by before I sprang forward to pick up the few dingy photographs that had fallen out of his hand on to the grimy patch of carpet beneath. But he himself had stooped even more abruptly, and our skulls collided together with a crack that for the moment all but dazed me.

"But the eye moves almost as swiftly as the mind, and the collision had not been hasty enough to prevent my snatching a glimpse of one or two of them, photographs of which neither this widower nor his wife had been the original. I drew back appalled—their details fixed in my mind as if etched there by a flash of lightning. And, leaving him to gather up his further evidences as best he could, I instantly found myself edging towards the door. Those squalid oblongs of cardboard were easily concealed in his immense palm. He pawed them together as clumsily as a bear might combs of honey; then slowly raised his gray dishevelled head, and met my eyes.

"I paused. 'You have had other visitors at times?' I queried as mildly as my tongue would allow.

" 'What visitors, young man, do you mean, may I ask?' An extraordinary change had come into his voice—a flatness, an obsequiousness. The ingratiating tones were muffled, as if he could hardly trust himself to speak. For a while I could only gape in reply.

" 'Like myself,' I blurted out at last. 'Visitors who

come to—well, out of sheer curiosity. There's the other route, I suppose?'

"My one desire just then was to keep my thoughts about Mr. Kempe rational and within bounds. To make a monster of him would be merely to lose my head once more as I had already lost it on that afternoon's journey. None the less I was now looking at him through the after-image of those chance-seen photographs. They were a disturbing medium. The body of a human being who has fallen from a great height is not pleasing and pacifying to look at even though for a while its owner may have survived the fatality. There were others, too; and yet, it was less his photographs than the amateur photographer that had set my teeth on edge. He looked so old and so helpless—like an animal, as I say, enslaved by—and yet incapable of obeying—some heaven-sent instinct. That terrifying, doglike despair!

"But then, open your newspaper any fine morning of your life, and which is the more likely to greet you on the news-page: the innocent young lady in the pink gauze petticoats over there, or that old figure of fun in the monk's cowl?"

The tortoiselike shape of the man in leggings once more stirred on its stool. But this time his little eyes were turned in my direction.

"How did you manage to get out at last?" I enquired of the schoolmaster.

"Well," he said, "all this time Mr. Kempe had been watching me as circumspectly as I had been watching him, but as if, too, he were uncertain how many paces distant from him I stood. Then once more voice and manner changed. He feigned to be reassured. 'It has

been a wonderful day,' he remarked, with the dignity of an old retired scholar whose dubious fortune it has been to entertain a foreign prince; 'a wonderful day. And my only regret is that I was unprepared for the occasion; that I have so poor a hospitality to offer. You may have had an exceedingly painful experience this afternoon. Why, my dear sir, in the absence of mind that comes over me once I embark on this hobby of mine, I haven't even asked you to wash your hands.'

"Almost involuntarily I glanced down at them. Like Macbeth's they needed the invitation. But I must confess I preferred this old minister when he was not talking to me as if I were an imbecile child in a Sunday School. Besides, I knew perfectly well that—whether from that tumbling watch-tower of his, or from some hiding-place in the woods—there had been one intent witness of that experience. I thrust my hands into my pockets out of his sight.

" 'If you will await me here a moment,' he went on —and his utterance began to thicken again, 'I will get the key to the chapel—a remarkable, even unique example of its order. There was a well, too, in former times, and even archeologists have failed to agree about its date. They used to come; they used to come: and would argue, too. Why I can *prove* it is in parts at least not later than the ninth century. And the interior . . . but, dear me, it will soon be dark; and—no—you mustn't think of leaving the house to-night. I need company; I *need* it.' He poked forward at me again, while yet furtively and rapidly edging towards the door.

"With a peculiar disinclination to come into the very slightest contact with his person, I had to dodge out of

his way to allow him to pass, and attempted to do so without appearing to show like a visitor who has strayed by mischance into the cage of a dangerous animal in some zoological garden. The old gray tousled head turned not an inch upon its heavy angular shoulders as he passed me; but in the dimming light of the window I caught a glimpse of the wide sea-like eyes intently fixed on me—like lifeless planets in the waste of space.

"Even a young man may have intimations of the fool he is about to prove himself. Intimations, I mean, that come too late. Before the cumbrous door had closed behind him, I was listening for the sound of the key being turned in the lock. I didn't even wait to try the handle, but tiptoed as rapidly as possible over the heaped-up books on the floor towards the window. It was one of dingy oblong panes, and the hasp was broken. The drop beneath its sill—to any one at least who had reached the house by the less easy way of the two roads—was almost as easy as getting into bed. It would land me some ten feet below on a heap of vegetable rubbish. But the hinges of the window had been allowed to rust, and the wood to shrink and swell with the changing seasons.

"Not a sound had followed the locking of the door, and unless Mr. Kempe had disencumbered his feet of their boots, he was at that moment collecting his wits immediately outside of it. I tiptoed across once more. 'Please don't let me be any trouble,' I bawled. 'I could come again another time.'

"The next instant I was back at the window, listening. The answer boomed down at me at last from some room above. But I could distinguish no words—merely a senseless babble. It would be indiscreet, it seemed, to

hesitate any longer. I seized a frowsy cushion and with all my force thrust it against the rotten frame of the window. It flew open with but one explosive crack. I was prepared for it. Once more I paused. Then after a last hasty glance round that dismal laboratory, its scattered books, fusty papers, blackened ceiling, broken lamp—and that one half-obliterated portrait of the gentle apologetic faded young woman on the wall, I clambered soundlessly on to the sill, and dropped. The refuse below was thoroughly rotten; not a twig snapped.

"The moment I touched ground I regretted this ignominious exit. There was I, a young man—thirty to forty years at least the junior of Mr. Kempe—a young man who, whether or not possessed of a soul, was at least fairly capable in body. Surely I might have ventured—! life has more riddles than one. But I did not pursue these thoughts far. The very look and appearance of the house as I glanced up at the window out of which I had descended so abruptly, its overhanging gable, its piebald darkened walls rising towards the first stars under the last of twilight—it was hardly less unhappy and unpleasing company than its tenant.

"I groped my way beyond its purlieus as quickly and silently as I could, mounted a low wall and was already in the woods. By luck I had caught a glimpse of the Plough straddling above the chimneys, so I knew my North, and edged off upwards and westwards for some little distance under the motionless trees before I came to a halt.

"The house was now out of sight, its owner once more abandoned to his own resources and researches. And I was conscious of no particular desire to return to examine

the interior of the small stone chapel, nor the inscriptions on the few headstones which memorialised those who had been longest slumbering in the ground near-by.

"Possibly I was not the only visitor who had bidden the recluse in this valley so unmannerly a farewell. I cannot at any rate imagine anyone simpleton enough to venture back even in response to the sound of hysterical weeping that came edging across the silence of the woods."

"D'ye mean that old man was *crying?*" queried our friend in leggings.

The drizzle in the lane outside the Inn had plucked up courage as daylight ebbed, and had increased to a steady downpour. He had to repeat his question.

"I mean," said the schoolmaster a little acidly, "exactly what I say. I am nothing much of a traveller, or perhaps I could tell you what resemblance the noise of it had to the cajolings of a crocodile."

"My God!" coughed the other derisively. With this he seemed to have finally made up his mind, and lurched heavily off his stool. And without even so much as a "good-night" to our landlady, he betook himself out of the bar.

Except for the noise of the rain a complete silence followed his departure.

"And you never went back?" I ventured presently. "Or—or spoke about the matter?"

"I mean, do you see," said the schoolmaster, "I acted like a fool. I should have taken Mr. Kempe simply on his face value. There was nothing to complain about. He hadn't *invited* me to come and see him. And it was hardly his fault, I suppose, if an occasional visitor failed to complete so precarious a journey. I wouldn't go so far

as that. He was merely one of those would-be benefactors to the human race who go astray; get lost, ramble on down the wrong turning. *Qua* pioneer, I ask," he rapped his fingers on the pewter of the counter, "was he exceptional?" He was arguing with himself, not with me.

I nodded. "But what was your impression—was *he* sure—Mr. Kempe? Either way?"

"The Soul?"

"Yes," I echoed, "the Soul."

But I repeated the word under my breath, for something in the sound of our voices seemed to have attracted the attention of the landlady. And, alas, she had decided to light up.

The solemnity of Man's remotest ancestors lay over the schoolmaster's features. "I can't say," he replied. "I am not certain even if he was aware how densely populated his valley appeared to be—to a chance visitor, I mean. What's more, to judge from the tones of his voice, he had scarcely the effect of a single personality. There were at least three Mr. Kempes present that evening. And I haven't the faintest wish in the world to meet any one of them again."

"And afterwards? Was it comparatively easy finding your way—on to the new cliff road?"

"Comparatively," said the schoolmaster. "Though it took time. But nights are fairly short in May, even in country as thickly wooded as that."

I continued to look at him without speaking; yet another unuttered question on my lips.

To judge from the remote friendly smile he just blinked at me, he appeared to have divined it, though it produced no direct answer. He got down from his stool,

looked at his empty glass—and for the first time I noticed he was wearing mittens over his small bluish hands. "It's getting late," he said, with an eye fixed vacantly once more on the automatic machine in the corner of the tap-room. There was no denying it; nor that even the musty interior of the Blue Boar looked more hospitable than the torrential darkness of the night outside.

How strange is man. The spectacle depressed me beyond words—as if it had any more significance than that for its passing hour a dense yet not unbeneficent cloud was spread betwixt this earth and ours and the faithful shining of the stars.

But I did not mention this to the schoolmaster. He seemed to be lost in a dark melancholy, his face a maze of wrinkles. But beyond him—is a cracked looking-glass —I could see his double sitting there upon its stool. I was conscious that in some way I had bitterly disappointed him. I looked at him—my hand on the door-handle—waiting to go out. . . .

Missing

T was the last day of a torrid week in London—the flaming crest of what the newspapers called a *heat wave*. The exhausted inmates of the dazzling, airless streets—plateglass, white stone, burnished asphalt, incessant roar din, fume and odours—have the appearance at such times of insects trapped in an oven of a myriad labyrinthine windings and chambers: a glowing brazen maze to torture Christians in. To have a *mind* even remotely resembling it must be Satan's sole privilege!

I had been shopping; or rather, I had been loafing about from one department on to another in one of the huge "stores" in search of bathing-drawers, a preventative of insect bites, and a holiday "shocker," and had retired at last incapable of buying anything—even in a world where pretty well everything except peace of mind can be bought, and sold. The experience had been oppressive and trying to the temper.

Too hot, too irritable even to lunch, I had drifted into a side street, and then into a second-hand bookshop that happened still to be open this idle Saturday afternoon; and having for ninepence acquired a copy of a book on psychoanalysis which I didn't want and should never read, I took refuge in a tea shop.

In spite of the hot-water-fountain on the counter it was a degree or two cooler in here, though even the marble-top tables were tepid to the touch. Quiet and drowsy, too. A block of ice surmounted the dinner wagon by the counter. The white clock face said a quarter to three. Few chairs were now occupied; the midday mellay was over. A heavy slumbrousness muffled the place—the flies were as idle as the waitresses, and the waitresses were as idle as the flies.

I gave my order, and sat back exhausted in a listless vacancy of mind and body. And my dazed eyes having like the flies little of particular interest to settle on, settled on the only fellow reveller that happened to be sitting within easy reach. At first glimpse there could hardly be a human being you would suppose less likely to attract attention. He was so scrupulously respectable, so entirely innocent of "atmosphere." Even a Chelsea psychic would have been compelled to acknowledge that this particular human being had either disposed of his aura or had left it at home. And yet my first glimpses of him had drawn me out of the vacuum into which I had sunk as easily as a cork is drawn out of an empty bottle.

He was sitting at a table to the left, and a little in front of me. The glare from the open door and the gentler light from the cream-blinded shop window picked out his every hair and button. It flooded in on him from the sparkling glittering street, focussed him, "placed" him, arranged him—as if for a portrait in the finest of oils for next year's "Academy." Limelight on the actor manager traversing the blasted heath is mere child's play by comparison.

Obviously he was not "the complete Londoner"—

though that can hardly be said to be a misfortune. On the other hand, there was nothing rural, and only a touch or so of the provincial in his appearance. He wore a neat—an excessively neat—pepper-and-salt tweed suit, the waistcoat cut high and exhibiting the points of a butterfly collar and a triangle of black silk cravat slipped through a gold mourning ring. His ears maybe were a little out of the mode. They had been attached rather high and flat on either side of his conical head with its dark, glossy, silver-speckled hair.

The nose was straight, the nostrils full. They suggested courage of a kind; possibly, even, on occasion, bravado. He looked the kind of man, I mean, it is well to keep out of a corner. But the eyes that were now peering vacantly down that longish nose over a trim but unendearing moustache at the crumbs on his empty plate were too close together. So, at least, it seemed to me. But then I am an admirer of the wide expressive brow —such as our politicians and financiers display. Those eyes at any rate gave this spruce and respectable person just a hint, a soupçon of the fox. I have never heard though that the fox is a dangerous animal even in a corner; only that he has his wits about him and preys on geese—whereas my stranger in the tea shop had been refreshing himself with Osborne biscuits.

It was hot. The air had grown more stagnant. And heat—unless in Oriental regions—is not conducive to exquisite manners; far otherwise. I continued to watch this person, indolently speculating whether his little particularities of appearance did not match, or matched too precisely. Those ears and that cravat, for example; or those spruce-moustached nostrils and the glitter of the

close-neighbouring eyes. And why had he brought to mind a tightly-packed box with no address on it? He began to be a burden, yet I could not keep my eyes away from him—nor from his hands. They were powerful and hairy, with large knuckles; and now that they were not in use he had placed them on his knees under the dark polished slab of his marble table. Beneath those knees rested his feet (the toes turned in a little) in highly-polished boots, with thickish soles and white socks.

There is, I agree, something peculiarly vulgar in thus picking a fellow-creature to pieces. But then Keats so dissected Miss Brawne even when he was in love with her, and it was certainly not love at first sight between myself and this stranger.

Whether he knew it or not, he was attaching himself to me; he was making his influence felt. It was odd, then, that he could remain so long unconscious of so detached a scrutiny. Maybe that particular nerve in him had become atrophied. He looked as if a few other rather important nerves might be atrophied. When he did glance up at me—the waitress having appeared with my tea at the same moment—there was a far-away startled look in his bleak blue-black eyes—as if he had been called back.

Nothing more; and even at that it was much such a look as had been for some little time fixed on the dry biscuit crumbs in his empty plate. He seemed indeed to be a man accustomed to being startled or surprised into vigilance without reason. But having seen me looking at him, he did not hesitate. He carefully took up his hat, his horn-handled and gold-mounted umbrella, and a large rusty scaling leather bag that lay on a chair beside him;

rose; and stepping gently over with an almost catlike precision, seated himself in the chair opposite to mine. I continued to pour out my tea.

"You will excuse me troubling you," he began in a voice that suggested he could sing tenor though he spoke bass, "but would you kindly tell me the number of the omnibus that goes from here to King's Cross? I am a stranger to this part of London."

I called after the waitress: "What is the number of the 'bus," I said, "that goes from here to King's Cross?"

"The number of the 'bus, you si, that goes from here to King's Cross?"

"Yes," I said, "to King's Cross."

"I'm sure I don't know," she said. "I'll ask the counter." And she tripped off in her silk stockings and patent leather shoes.

"The counter will know," I assured him. He looked at me, moving his lips over his teeth as if either or both for some reason had cause to be uneasy.

"I am something of a stranger to London altogether," he said, "and I don't usually come these ways: it's a novelty to me. The omnibuses are very convenient."

"Don't you? Is it?" I replied. "Why not?" They were rather point-blank questions (and a gentleman, said Dr. Johnson, does not ask questions) but somehow they had slipped out as if at his pressing invitation.

He looked at me, his eyes seeming to draw together into an intenser focus. He was not exactly squinting, but I have noticed a similar effect in the eyes of a dog when its master is about to cry "Fetch it!"

"You see," he said, "I live in the country, and only come to London when I seem to need company—badly,

I mean. There's a great contrast between the country and this. All these houses. So many strange faces. It takes one out of oneself."

I glanced round at the sparsely occupied tables. A cloud apparently had overlaid the sun, for a faint coppery glow was now reflected from the drowsy street. I could even hear the white-faced clock ticking. To congratulate him on his last remark would hardly have been courteous after so harmless an advance. I merely looked at him. What kind of self, I was vaguely speculating, would return into his hospitality when he regained his usual haunts.

"I have a nice little place down there," he went on, "but there's not much company. Lonely: especially now. Even a few hours makes all the difference. You would be surprised how friendly a place London can be; the people, I mean: helpful."

What can only be described as a faint whinny had sounded in his voice as he uttered that "helpful." Was he merely to prove yet another of those unfortunate travellers who have lost the return halves of their railway tickets? Had he marked me down for his prey?

"It is not so much what they say," he continued, laying his hand on the marble table; "but just, well, their company, you know." I glanced at the heavy ring on its third finger and then at his watch chain—woven apparently of silk or hair—with little gold rings at intervals along it to secure the plait. His own gaze continued to rest on me with so penetrating, so corkscrew-like an intensity, that I found myself glancing over my shoulder in search of the waitress. She however was now engaged in animated argument with the young lady at the pay-desk.

"Do you live *far* from London?" I ventured.

"About seventy miles," he replied with an obvious gulp of relief at this impetus to further conversation. "A nice old house too considering the rent, roomy enough but not too large. Its only drawback in some respects is there's nothing near it—not within call, I mean; and we —I—suffer from the want of a plentiful supply of water. Especially now."

Why so tactless a remark on this broiling afternoon should have evoked so vivid a picture of a gaunt yellow-brick building perched amid sloping fields parched lint-white with a tropical drought, its garden little more than a display of vegetable anatomies, I cannot say. It was a house of a hideous aspect; but I confess it stirred my interest. Whereupon my stranger, apparently, thought he could safely glance aside; and I could examine him more at leisure. It was not, I have to confess, a taking face. There was a curious hollowness in its appearance. He looked like the shell of a man, or rather, like a hermit crab—that neat pepper-and-salt tweed suit and so on being a kind of second-hand accumulation on his back.

"And of course," he began again, "now that I am alone I become"—he turned sharply back on me—"I become more conscious of it."

"Of the loneliness?" I suggested.

Vacancy appeared on his face, as if he had for the instant stopped thinking. "Yes," he replied, once more transfixing me with those clear close eyes of his, "the loneliness. It seems to increase more and more as the other slips away into the past. But I suppose we most of us have much the same experience; just of that, I mean. And even in London . . ."

I busied myself with my tea things, having no particular wish at the moment to continue the conversation. But he hadn't any intention of losing his fish as easily as all that.

"There's a case now here in the newspaper this morning," he went on, his glance wandering off to a copy of the *Daily Mail* that lay on the chair next the one he had just vacated. "A man not very much older than I am —found dead. Dead. The only occupant of quite a good-sized house, I should judge, at Stoke Newington—though I don't know the place personally. Living there for years on end without even a charwoman to do for him—to—to work for him. Still even there there was some kind of company, I suppose. He could look out of the window; he could hear people moving about next door. Where I am, there isn't another house in sight, not even a barn, and so far as I can see, what they call Nature doesn't become any the more friendly however long you stay in a place—the birds and that kind of thing. It may get better in time; but it's only a few months ago since I was left quite like this—when my sister died."

Obviously I was hooked beyond hope of winning free again until this corkscrew persistent creature had had his way with me. The only course seemed to be to get the experience over as quickly as possible. It is not easy, however, to feign an active sympathy, and mention of his dead sister had produced in my mind only a faint reflex image of a dowdy lady no longer young in dingy black. Still, it was an image that proved to be not very far from the actuality.

"Any close companionship like that," I murmured, "when it is broken is a tragic thing."

He appeared to have seen no significance in my re-

mark. "And you see, once there were three of us. Once. It never got into the papers—at least not into the London papers, except just by mention, I mean." He moistened his lips. "Did you ever happen to come across a report about a lady, a Miss Dutton, who was 'missing'?"

It was a pretty stupid question, for after all, few human beings are so gifted as to be able to recall the names even of the protagonists in genuine *causes célèbres*. To bear in mind every sort of Miss Dutton whose disappearance would be referred to only in news-snippets borrowed by the Metropolitan press from the provincial, would be rather too much of a tax even for those interested in such matters. I sipped my tea and surveyed him as sagaciously as possible; "Not that I can actually recall," I said. "Miss—Dutton? It isn't a very uncommon name. You knew her?"

"Knew her!" he repeated, placing his hands on his knees and sitting stiffly back in his chair, his eyes unflinchingly fixed on mine. "She lived with us a matter of two years or more. It was us she left. It was my house she was missing from. It caused quite a stir in the neighbourhood. It was the talk of the countryside. There was an Enquiry; and all that."

"How long ago?"

"Pretty near a year ago. Yes; a year yesterday."

"Do you mean the enquiry, or when Miss Dutton disappeared?"

"The enquiry," he replied in a muffled fashion, as if a little annoyed at my want of perspicacity. "The other was—oh, a month or more before that."

The interview was becoming rather a laborious way of extracting a story, but somehow its rudiments had begun

to interest me. I had nothing to do. Judging from the look of the street, the quicksilver in the thermometer was still edging exquisitely upwards. I detested the thought of emerging into that oven. So apparently did my companion, unless the mere sound of his voice seemed to him better entertainment than, say, the nearest "picture palace"—where at least one would be out of sight and it would be dark.

"I should have thought," I began again in a voice as matter-of-fact as I could manage, "that living as you do, a stir in the neighbourhood would not much matter, though I agree that the mystery itself must have mattered a good deal more. It must have been a great shock to you both."

"Ay," he said, with a gleam in his eye, "but that's just what you Londoners don't seem to understand. You have your newspapers and all that. But in most ways you don't get talked about much. It's not so in the country. I guarantee you might be living right in the middle of the Yorkshire Fells and yet, if it came to there being anything to keep their tongues wagging, you'd know that your neighbours were talking of you, and what about, for miles around. It gets across—like those black men's drums one hears about in West Africa. As if the mere shock of the thing wasn't enough! What I feel about it is that nowadays people don't seem to show any sympathy, any ordinary feeling with—with those in such circumstances; at least, not country people. Wouldn't you say yourself," he added, with feline rapidity, "that if you were reported as missing it would be rough luck if nobody cared?"

"I don't quite see what you mean," I replied. "I

thought you said that the disappearance of your friend made a stir in the neighbourhood."

"Yes; but they were not thinking so much of her as of the cause of it."

We exchanged a long glance, but without much addition to my own small fund of information. "But surely," I ventured, 'that must depend upon where she was supposed to have disappeared *to?*"

"That," he replied, "they never knew. We couldn't find out not one iota about it. You've no idea"—he drew his hand down over his face as if to clear away a shadow from his eyes—"you've no idea. Since she has gone I feel almost sometimes as if she can never have been real. *There,* but not real; if you understand me. I see her; and then the real thing goes again. It never occurred to me, that."

"The psychologists would tell us something about that."

"The what?" he asked sharply.

"People interested in the working of the mind, you know. After all, we can't definitely say whether that teapot there is real—what it is in itself, I mean. And merely to judge from its looks," I added, "one might hope it was a pure illusion."

He looked hard at the teapot. "Miss Dutton was a very well-preserved woman for her age," he said. "And when I say 'not real,' it's only in a manner of speaking, I mean. I've got her portrait in the newspaper in my pocket-book. That ought to prove her real enough. I never knew any one who was more 'all there,' as they say. She was a good friend to me—I have every reason to remember her. She came along of her own free

will—just a chance meeting, in Scarborough, as a matter of fact. And she liked the comforts of a home after all those hotels and boarding houses."

In the course of these ruminating and mournful remarks—and there was unmistakable "feeling" in his tones—he was rather privily turning over the contents of an old leather pocket-book with an inelastic black band. He drew out a frayed newspaper cutting, and put it down on the table beside the teapot.

"Looking at that, you wouldn't be in much doubt what Miss Dutton was in herself, now, would you? You'd recognise her," he raised his eyes, "if she were—if you met her, I mean, in these awful streets? I would myself."

It was impossible to decide whether this last remark was ironical, triumphant, embittered, or matter-of-fact; so I looked at Miss Dutton. She was evidently a blonde and a well-preserved woman, as my friend had intimated; stoutish, with a plump face, a plump nose, infantile blue eyes, frizzy hair, and she wore (what a few years ago were old-fashioned and are now new-fashioned) long ear-rings.

It was curious what a stabilising effect the ear-rings produced. They resembled the pole Blondin used to carry as he tripped across his rope over the Niagara Falls. Miss Dutton was looking out of her blurred image with a sort of insouciance, gaiety, "charm," the charm that photographers aim at but rather seldom convey. Destiny, apparently, casts no retrospective shadow. I defy anybody to have found the faintest hint in that aware, vain, commonplace, good-natured face which would suggest Miss Dutton was ever going to be "missed"—missed,

I mean, in the sense of becoming indiscoverable. In the other sense her friends would no doubt miss her a good deal. But then boarding-houses and hotels are the resorts rather of vagrant acquaintances than of friends.

The owner of the newspaper snippet was scrutinising the gay, blurred photograph with as much interest as I was; though to him it was upside-down. There was a queer fond look on his face, a little feline, perhaps, in its sentimentality.

I pushed back the cutting across the marble table and he carefully reinterred it in his pocket-book. "I was wondering," he rambled on as he did so, "what you might have thought of it—without prejudice, so to speak, if you had come across it—casually-like; in the newspaper, I mean?"

The question was not quite so simple as it sounded. It appeared as if my new acquaintance were in wait for a comment which he himself was eager to supply. And I had nothing much to say.

"It's difficult, you know, to judge from prints in newspapers," I ventured at last. "They are usually execrable even as caricatures. But she looks, if I may say so, an uncommonly genial woman: feminine—and a practical one, too. Not one, I mean, who would be likely to be missing, except on purpose—of her own choice, that is." Our eyes met an instant. "The whole business must have been a dreadful shock and anxiety to you. And, of course, to Miss . . . to your sister, I mean."

"My name," he retorted abruptly, shutting his eyes while a bewildering series of expressions netted themselves on his face, "my name is Bleet."

"Miss Bleet," I added, glancing at the pocket into which

the book had by now disappeared, and speculating, too, why so preposterous an *alias* should have occurred to apparently so ready a tongue.

"You were saying 'genial,'" he added rapidly. "And that is what they all agreed. Even her only male relative —an uncle, as he called himself, though I can swear she never mentioned him in that or in any other capacity. She hadn't always been what you might call a happy woman, mind you. But they were bound to agree that those two years under my care—in our house—were the happiest in Miss Dutton's life. We made it a real home to her. She had her own rooms and her few bits of furniture—photographs and boxes and so on, quite private. It's a pretty large house considering the rent—country, you know; and there was a sort of a new wing added to it fifty years or more ago. Old-fashioned, of course—open fireplace, no bath, enormous kitchen range —swallows coal by the bushel—and so on—very inconvenient, but cheap. And though my sister was not in a position to supervise the housekeeping, there couldn't be a more harmless and affectionate creature. To those, that is, who were kind to her. She'd run away from those who weren't—just run away and hide. I must explain that my poor sister was not quite—was a little weak in her intellects—from her childhood. It was always a great responsibility. But as time went on," he drew his hand wearily over his face, "Miss Dutton herself very kindly relieved me of a good deal of that. You said she looked a practical woman; so she was."

The narrative was becoming steadily more personal, and disconcerting. And yet—such is humanity—it was as steadily intensifying in interest. A low grumble of

thunder at that moment sounded over the street, and a horse clattered down with its van beyond the open door. My country friend did not appear to have noticed it.

"You never know quite where you are with the ladies," he suddenly ejaculated, and glanced piercingly up—for at that moment our waitress had drawn near.

"It's a 'Ighteen," she said, pencil on lip, and looking vacantly from one to the other of us.

"'Ighteen,'" echoed her customer sharply; "what's that? Oh, the omnibus. You didn't say what you meant. Thank you." She hovered on, check-book in hand. "And please bring me another cup of coffee." He looked at me as if with the intention of duplicating his order. I shook my head. "One cup, then, miss; no hurry."

The waitress withdrew.

"It looks as if rain was coming," he went on, and as if he were thirsting for it as much as I was. "As I was saying, you can never be quite sure where you are with women; and, mind you, Miss Dutton was a woman of the world. She had seen a good deal of life—been abroad—Gay Paree, Monte Carlo, and all that. Germany before the war, too. She could read French as free and easy as you could that mennoo there. Paper-bound books with pictures on them, and that kind of thing." He was looking at me, I realised, as if there were no other way of intimating the particular kind of literature he had in mind.

"I used to wonder sometimes what she could find in us: such a lonely place; no company. Though, of course, she was free to ask any friends if she wanted to, and talked of them too when in the mood. Good class, to

judge from what she said. What I mean is, she was quite her own mistress. And I must say there could not be more good humour and so on than what she showed my poor sister. At least, until later. She'd talk to her as if conversing; and my sister would sit there by the window, looking back at her and smiling and nodding just as if she were taking it all in. And who knows, perhaps she was. What I mean is, it's possible to have things in your head which you can't quite put into so many words. It's one of the things I look for when I come up to London: the faces that could tell a story though what's behind them can't."

I nodded.

"I can assure you that before a few weeks were over she had got to be as much at home with us as if we had known her all our lives. Chatty and domesticated, and all that. And using the whole house just as if it belonged to her. All the other arrangements were easy, too. I can say now, and I said it then, that we never once up to then demeaned ourselves to a single word of disagreement about money matters or anything else. A woman like that, who has been all over the continent, isn't likely to go far wrong in that. I agree the terms were on the generous side; but then, you take me, so were the arrangements.

"She asked herself to raise them when she had been with us upwards of twelve months. But I said 'No.' I said, 'A bargain's a bargain, Edna'—we were 'Edna' and 'William' to one another, by then, and my sister too. She was very kind to my poor sister; got a specialist up all the way from Bath—though for all his prying questions he did nothing, as I knew he wouldn't. You can't take those things so late. Mind you, as I say, the busi-

ness arrangements were all on one side. Miss Dutton liked things select and comfortable. She liked things to go smoothly, as we all do, I reckon. She had been accustomed to smart boarding-houses and hotels—that kind of thing. And I did my level best to keep things nice."

My stranger's face dropped into a rather gloomy expression, as if poor humanity had sometimes to resign itself to things a little less agreeable than the merely smooth and nice. He laid down his spoon, which he had been using with some vigour, and sipped his coffee.

"What I was going to explain," he went on, rubbing at his moustache, "is that everything was going perfectly easy—just like clockwork, when the servant question came up. My house, you see, is on what you may call the large side. It's old in parts, too. Up to then we had had a very satisfactory woman—roughish but willing. She was the wife, or what you might just as well call the widow, of a sailor. I mean he was one of the kind that has a ditto in every port, you know. She was glad of the place, glad to be where her husband couldn't find her, even though the stipulation was that her wages should be permanent. That system of raising by driblets always leads to discontent. And I must say she was a fair tyrant for work.

"Besides her, there was a help from the village—precious little good *she* was. Slummocky—and *stupid!* Still, we had got on pretty well up to then, up to Miss Dutton's time, and for some months after. But cooking for three mouths is a different thing to two. Besides, Miss Dutton liked her meals dainty-like: a bit of fish, or soup occasionally, toast-rack, tantalus, serviettes on the table—that kind of thing. But all that came on

gradual-like—the thin edge of the wedge; until at last, well, 'exacting' wasn't in it.

"And I must say," he turned his wandering eye once more on mine, "I must say, she had a way of addressing menials which sometimes set even my teeth on edge. She was a lady, mind you—though what *that* is when the breath is out of your body it's not so easy to say. And she had the lady's way with them—those continental hotels, I suppose. All very well in a large establishment where one works up against another and you can call them names behind their backs. But our house wasn't an establishment. It wouldn't do there: not in the long run, even if you had an angel for a general and a cook to match.

"Mind you, as I say, Miss Dutton was always niceness itself to my poor sister: never a hard word or a contemptuous look—not to her face nor behind her back, not up to then. I wouldn't have tolerated it either. And you know what talking to a party that can only just sit, hands in lap, and smile back at you means, or maybe a word now and then that doesn't seem to have anything to do with what you've been saying. It's a great affliction. But servants were another matter. Miss Dutton couldn't demean herself to them. She lived in another world. It was, 'Do this'; and 'Why isn't it done?'—all in a breath. I smoothed things over, though they got steadily worse and worse, for weeks and weeks, ay, months. It wore me to a shadow.

"And one day the woman—Bridget was her name—Irish, you know—she flared up in earnest and gave her, as they say, as good as she got. I wasn't there at the time. But I heard afterwards all that passed, and three

times over—on the one side at least. I had been into the town in the runabout. And when I came home, Mrs. Tantrums had packed up her box, got a gig from the farm, and was gone for good. It did me a world of harm, that did.

"Pretty well upset, I was too, as you can imagine. I said to Miss Dutton, 'Edna,' I said, 'all I am saying is, was it necessary to go to such extremes? Not,' I said, 'mind you, Edna that she was all sugar and honey even to me. I knew the wrong side of her mouth years before *you* appeared on the scene. What you've got to do with such people is—to manage—be firm, keep 'em low, but manage. It isn't commonsense to cut off your tongue to spite your teeth. She's a woman, and Irish at that,' I said, 'and you know what to expect of them.'

"I was vexed, that's a fact, and perhaps I spoke rather more sharply than need have been. But we were good friends by that time: and if honest give-and-take isn't possible between friends, where are you? I ask you. There was by that time too, nothing left over-private between us, either. I advised her about her investments and so on, though I took precious good care not to be personally involved. Not a finger stirring unless she volunteered it first. That all came out too. But it was nothing to do with me, now, was it, as man to man, if the good lady took a fancy into her head to see that my poor sister was not left to what's called the tender mercies of this world after my death?

"And yet, believe me, they fixed on that, like leeches. My hell, they did! At the Enquiry, I mean. And I don't see how much further their decency could have gone if they had called it an Inquest; and . . ."

Yet another low (almost gruff) volley of thunder interrupted his discourse. He left the sentence in the air; his mouth ajar. I have never met any one that made such active use of his chin in conversation, by the way, as Mr. Bleet did. It must have been exceedingly fatiguing. I fancy he mistook just then the expression on my face for one of enquiry. He leant forward, pushing down towards me that long hairy finger on the marble table-top.

"When I say 'tender mercies,'" he explained, "I don't mean that my sister would have been left penniless, even if Miss Dutton or nobody like her had come into the house. There was money of my own too, though, owing to what I need not explain"—he half swallowed the words—"not much." He broke off. "It seems as if we are in for a bit of a thunderstorm. But I'd sooner it was here than down my way. When you're alone in the house you seem to notice the noise more."

"I fancy it won't be much," I assured him. "It will clear the air."

His eyes opened as if in astonishment that any mere act of nature could bring such consolation.

"You were saying," I exclaimed, "that you lost your maid?" He glanced up sharply. "Though of course," I added hastily, "you mustn't let me intrude on your private affairs."

"Not at all; oh, not at all," he interrupted with relief. "I thought you said, 'lost my head.' Not at all. It makes all the difference to me—I can assure you, to be able to go over it like this. Friendly-like. To get a listener who has not been fed up on all that gossip and slander. It takes some living down, too. Nothing satisfies them:

nothing. From one week's end to another you can't tell where they'll unearth themselves next."

It was becoming difficult to prevent a steadily growing distaste for my companion from showing itself in my face. But then self-pity is seldom ingratiating. Fortunately the light where we sat was by now little better than dusk. Indeed, to judge from the growing gloom in our tea-shop, the heavens at this moment were far from gracious. I determined to wait till the rain was over. Besides, though my stranger himself was scarcely winning company, and his matter was not much above the sensational newspaper order, the mere zigzagging of his narrative was interesting. Its technique, I mean, reminded me of the definition of a crab: "The crab is a little red animal that walks backwards."

"The fact is," he went on, "on that occasion—I mean about the servant—Miss Dutton and I had words. I own it. Not that she resented my taking the thing up in a perfectly open and friendly way. She knew she had put me in a fair quandary. But my own private opinion is that when you are talking to a woman it's best not to bring in remarks about the sex in general. A woman is herself or nothing, if you follow me. What she thinks is no more than another skin. Keep her sex out of it, and she'll be reasonable. But no further. As a matter of fact, I never argue with ladies. And I soon smoothed that over. It was only a passing cloud. And I must say, considering what a lady she *was,* she took the discomforts of having nothing but a good-for-nothing slattern in the house very generously, all things considered.

"Mind you, I worked *myself,* fit for any couple of

female servants: washed up dishes, laid the table, kept the little knick-knacks going. Ay, and I'd go into the town to fetch her out little delicacies: tinned soups and peaches, and such like: anything she might have a taste to. And I taught her to use the runabout for herself, though to hear her changing gear was like staring ruin in the face. A gallon of petrol to a hank of crimson silk —that kind of thing. Believe me, she'd go all those miles for a shampoo-powder, or to have tea at a tea-shop— though you can't beat raw new-laid eggs and them on the premises. They got to know her there. She was a rare one for the fashions: scarves and motor-veils, and that kind of thing. But I never demurred. It wasn't for me to make objections, particularly as she'd do a little shopping on the housekeeping side as well, now and then. Though, mind you, she knew sixpence from a shilling, and particularly towards the last.

"What was the worst hindrance was that my poor sister seemed to have somehow come to know there were difficulties in the house. I mean that there had begun to be. You don't know how they do it; but they do. And it doesn't add to your patience, I grant, when what you have done at one moment is done wrong over again the next. But she meant well, poor creature: and scolding at her only made things worse. Still, we got along happily enough for a time, until"—he paused once more with mouth ajar—"until Miss Dutton took it into her head to let matters come to a crisis. Now judging from that newspaper cutting I showed you, what would you take the lady's age to be? Allowing, as you might say, for all that golden hair?"

It was an indelicate question. Though why the mere

fact that Miss Dutton was now missing should intensify its indelicacy, it is not easy to say.

"Happiness makes one look younger than one really is," I suggested.

He gaped at me, as if in wonderment that in a world of woe he himself was not possessed of a white beard as long as your arm.

"'Happiness?'" he echoed.

"Yes, happiness."

"Well, what I mean is, you wouldn't say she was in the filly class; now, would you? High-spirited, easy-going, and all that; silly, too, at times: but no longer young. Not in her heyday, I mean."

I pushed my empty cup aside and looked at him. But he looked back at me without flinching, as if indeed it was a pleasant experience to be sharing with a stranger sentiments so naïve regarding "the fair sex."

"Mind you, I don't profess to be a young man either. But I can assure you on my word of honour, that what she said to me that evening—I was doing chores in the kitchen at the time, and she was there too, arranging flowers in a vause for supper; she had a dainty taste in flowers—well, she asked me why I was so unkind to her, so unresponsive, and—it came on me like a thunderbolt."

As if positively for exemplification, a sudden clap of thunder at that moment resounded overhead. The glasses and crockery around us softly tinkled in sympathy. We listened in silence to its reverberations dying away across the chimney tops; though my companion seemed to be taking them in through his mouth rather than through his ears. His cheek paled a little.

"That's what she asked me, I say. And I can tell you it took me on the raw. It was my turn to flare up. We had words again; nothing much, only a storm in a tea-cup." Instead of smiling at this metaphor in the circumstances, he seemed astonished, almost shocked, at its aptitude. But he pushed on boldly.

"And then after I had smoothed things over again, she put her cards on the table. Leap Year, and all that tom-foolery, not a bit of it! She was in dead earnest. She told me what I had guessed already, that she had scarcely a friend in the world. Never a word, mind you, of the Colonel—interloping old Pepper-face! She assured me, as I say, she hadn't not only a single relative, but hardly a friend; that she was, as you might say, alone in life, and—well, that her sentiments had become engaged. In honour bound I wouldn't have breathed this to a living soul who knew the parties; but to a stranger, if I may say so, it isn't quite the same thing. What she said was—in the kitchen there, and me in an apron, mind you, tied round me—doing chores—she said—well, in short, that she wanted to make a match of it. She had taken a fancy to me, and was I agreeable." There was no vanity in his face; only a stark unphilosophical astonishment. He seemed to think that to explain all is to forgive all; and was awaiting my concurrence.

"You mean she proposed marriage," I interposed with needless pedantry, and at once, but too late, wished the word back. For vestiges of our conversation had evidently reached the counter. Our waitress, still nibbling her pencil, was gazing steadily in our direction. And for some obscure reason this heat that we were sharing with

the world at large, combined with this preposterous farrago, was now irritating me almost beyond endurance. The fellow's complacency was incredible.

I beckoned to the young woman. "You said this gentleman's 'bus to King's Cross was No. Eighteen, didn't you?"

"Yes, 'Ighteen," she repeated.

"Then would you please bring him an ice."

Mr. Bleet gazed at me in stupefaction; a thick colour had mounted into his face. "You don't mean to say," he spluttered, "that *I* made any such mention of such a thing. I'm sure I never noticed it."

My impulse had been nothing more than a protest against my own boredom and fatigue; but the way he had taken it filled me with shame. What could the creature's state of mind be like if his memory was as untrustworthy as that? The waitress retired.

"It's so devilishly hot in here," I explained. "And even talking is fatiguing in this weather."

"Ay," he said in a low voice. "It is. But you aren't having one yourself?"

"No, thank you," I said, "I daren't. I can't take ices. Indigestion—it's a miserable handicap. . . . You were in the kitchen."

There was a pause. He sat looking foolishly at the little glass dishful of ice-cream: as surprising a phenomenon apparently as to an explorer from the torrid zone earth's northern snows must first appear. There was a look upon his face as if he had been "hurt," as if, like a child, at another harsh word he might burst out crying.

"I hardly know that it's worth repeating," he said at

last lamely. His fine resonant voice had lost its tone. "I suppose she intended it kindly enough. And I wouldn't say I hadn't suspected which way the wind was blowing: Willie this, and Willie that. I've always been William to them that know me, except Bill at school. But it was always Willie with her; and a languishing look to match. Still, I never expected what came after that. It took me aback.

"There she was, hanging on my every word, looking volumes, and me not knowing what to say. In a way too, I was attached to her. There were two sides to her, I allow that." He turned away but not, it seemed, in order to see the less conspicuous side more clearly. "I asked her to let me think things over, and I said it as any gentleman would. 'Let me think it over, Edna,' I said. 'You do me honour,' I said. Her hand was on my arm. She was looking at me. God being my witness, I tried to spare her feelings. I eased it over, meaning it all for the best. You see the prospect of it had no more than occurred to me. Married life wasn't what I was after. I shouldn't be as old as I am now—and unmarried, I mean —if that had been so. It was uncomfortable to see her carrying on like that: too early. But things having come to such a pass, well, as you might say, we glided into an understanding at last. And with what result? Why she made it an occasion for putting her foot down all the way round. And hadn't I known it of old?"

He looked at me searchingly, with those dog-bright eyes, those high-set ears, as if to discover where precisely I now was in relation to his confidences.

"She took the reins, as they say. All in good temper for the most part; but there was no mistaking it. Mis-

tress first and Mrs. after, in a manner of speaking. But when it came to speaking sharply to my poor sister on a matter which you wouldn't expect even a full-witted person to be necessarily very quick about at the uptake—I began to suspect I had made a mistake. I knew it then: but forewarned isn't always forearmed. And mistakes are easier to make than to put right. It had gone too far. . . ."

"If you really don't want that ice, I can easily ask the waitress to take it away," I assured him, if only to bring back that wandering empty eye from the reverie into which he seemed to have fallen. Or was it that he was merely absorbed in the picture of the rain-drenched street that was reflected in the looking-glass behind my chair?

"Thank you," he said, taking up the spoon.

"And Miss Dutton left you at last. Did she tell you she had any intention of going?"

"Never," he asseverated. "Not a word. No, not a single word. And if you *can't* explain it, well then, why go on trying? I say. Not at this late day. But you might as well argue with a stone wall. The heat had come by then. Last summer, you know: the drought. Not the great drought, I mean—but round our parts in particular. The whole place was dried up to a tinder; cracks in the clay; weeds dying; birds gone. Even the trees flagging: and the oaks half eaten up by caterpillars already. Meantime, I don't know how it was—unless, perhaps, the heat—but there had been another quarrel. They never got *that* out of me at the Enquiry, though; I can tell you. And that was patched up, too. I apologised because she insisted. But she had hurt me; she had hurt my feelings. And I couldn't see that mar-

riage was going to be a very practical experiment on those lines. But she came round; and considering what a genial woman of the world she looks like in that photograph, you wouldn't have guessed, would you, that crying, weeping, I mean, was much in her way? I found that out, too. And it didn't suit her, either. But she was what they call a woman made for affection. And I mean by *that,*" he broke in emphatically, "she liked to monopolise. She wasn't a sharer. We were badly in want of a servant ourselves by that time, as you may imagine. Going from bad to worse, and me with a poisoned thumb, opening tins. But *she* was in want of a servant still more. She wanted me. Husbands often are nothing much better. What's more, I don't wish to say anything against the—against her now; but for the life of me I can't see any reason why she should have gone so far as to insult me. And not a week since we were like birds on one roost. To insult me, mind you, with my poor sister there, listening by!

"But I had learned a bit by then. I held my tongue, though there was a plenty of things to say in reply if I could have demeaned myself to utter them. Plenty. I just went on looking out of the window, easing myself with my foot—we were in the drawing-room at the time—and the very sight of the dried-up grass, and the dead vegetables, and the sun pouring down out of the sky like lava from a volcano would have been enough in themselves to finish off most people's self-restraint. But as I say, I just stood there thinking of what I might have said, but saying nothing—just let her rant on.

"Why, for instance, do you suppose she had made out weeks before that her investments were bringing in twice

as much as they really did? Why all that stuff about Monte Carlo and the lady from America when it was only Boulogne and what they call a *pension,* which in plain English is nothing more than lodgings? Mind you," he said, as if to intercept the remark I had no intention of making, "mind you, I agree there *was* a competence, and I agree that, apart from a silly legacy to the Home for Cats and Dogs and that Belgian knacker trade, she had left all there was to leave to my sister—and long before what I told you about just now. I saw that in black and white. It was my duty. That was all settled. On the other hand, how was I to know that she wouldn't change her mind; that she hadn't been paving the way, as you may call it? And why had she deliberately deceived me? I thought it then, and I think it now, more than ever—considering what I have been through. It wasn't treating me fairly, and particularly before she was in a position when things couldn't be altered, so to speak, as between husband and wife."

Owing to the noise of the rain—and possibly in part to his grammar—it was only with difficulty that I could now follow what the creature was mumbling. I found my attention wandering. A miniature Niagara at least eighteen inches wide was at this moment foaming along the street gutter while the rain in the middle of the street as it rebounded above the smoking asphalt was lifting into the air an exquisite mist of spray. I watched it enthralled; it was sweet as the sight of palm-trees to my tired hot eyes, and its roar and motion lulled me for a moment or two into a kind of hypnotic trance. When I came back to myself and my trivial surroundings, I found

my companion eyeing me as if he had eagerly taken advantage of these moments of oblivion.

"That's the real thing," he said, as if to humour me, beckoning with his thumb over his shoulder. "That rain. But it's waste on only stones." He eyed it pensively, turning his head completely round on his narrow shoulders to do so. But only for a moment. He returned to the business in hand as promptly as if we gossipers had been called to order by the Chairman of a Committee.

"Now it says in that report there which you have just been reading, that Miss Dutton had not been seen after she left Crowstairs that afternoon of the 3rd of July. That's what it says—in so much print. And I say that's a lie. As it came out later on. And it doesn't make it any truer being in print. It's inaccurate—proved so. But perhaps I ought to tell you first exactly how the whole thing came about. Things get so confused in memory." Once more he wearily drew his hand over his face as if to obliterate even the memory itself. "But—quite apart from the others—it's a relief to get things clearer even in one's own mind. The fact is, the whole thing was over between us a day or two before. As I say, after the last little upset which I told you about, things were smoothed out again, as usual. At least on her side, though there was precious little in which I was really myself at fault. But my own belief is that she was an hysterical woman. What I mean is, she didn't need anything to make a fuss about; to fire up over. No foundation except just her own mood and feelings. I never was what they call a demonstrative person; it isn't

in our family. My father himself was a schoolmasterish kind of man. 'It hurt me more than it hurts you'; that kind of man. And up to the age of ten I can honestly say that I never once heard my mother answer him back. She felt it, mind you. He thrashed me little short of savage at times. She'd look on, crying; but she kept herself in. She knew it only made matters worse; and she died when I was twelve.

"Well, what I think is this—that Miss Dutton made a mistake about me. She liked comfort. Breakfast in bed; slippers at night; hot water to wash in; that kind of thing. I'll go further: she was meant for luxury. You could see it in her habits. If she had been twice as well off, she'd have wanted three times as many luxuries: lady's maid, evening dress, tea-gowns, music in the drawing-room—that sort of thing. And maybe it only irritated her when she found that I could keep myself in and just look calm, whatever she did or said. Hesitate to say whatever came into her mind?—not she!—true or untrue. Nor actual physical violence, either. Why months before, she threw a vause full of flowers at me: snowdrops."

The expression on his face suddenly became fixed, as if at an unexpected recollection.

"I am not suggesting," he testified earnestly, "considering—considering what came after, that I bear her any grudge or malice on account of all that. All I mean is that I was pressed and pushed on to a point that some would say was beyond human endurance. Maybe it was. But what I say is, let," his voice trembled, "bygones be bygones. I will say no more of that. My point is that Miss Dutton, after all, was to be, as they say, a bird of

passage. There had been a final flare up and all was over between us. Insult on insult she heaped on me. And my poor sister there, in her shabby old black dress, out peering at us, from between her fingers, trembling in the corner like a dumb animal. She had called her in.

"And me at my wits' end, what with the servant trouble and the most cantankerous and unreasonable lot of tradespeople you could lay hands on, north or south. I can tell you, I was pretty hard pressed. They dragged all that up at the Enquiry. Oh, yes, bless you. Trust 'em for that. Once it's men against man, then look to it. Not a *public* Enquiry, mind you. No call for that. And I *will* say the police, though pressing, and leaving no stone unturned, in a manner of speaking, were gentlemen by comparison. But such things leak out. You can't keep a penny-a-liner from gabbing, and even if there had been nothing worse to it they'd have made my life a hell upon earth."

"Nothing worse to it? How do you mean?"

His glance for the instant was entirely vacant of thought. "I mean," he said stubbornly, after a moment's hesitation, "the hurt to my private feelings. That's what I mean. I can hear her now. And the first thing I felt after it was all over, was nothing but relief. We couldn't have hit it off together, not for long: not after the first few weeks, anyhow. Better, I say, wash your hands of the whole thing. I grant you her decision had left me in a nasty pickle. As a matter of fact, she was to go in a week, and me to clear up the mess. Bills all over the place—fresh butter, mind you, olives, wine, tinned mock turtle—that kind of thing; and all down to my account. What I feel is, she oughtn't to have kept on at me like

that right up to the last. Wouldn't you have thought, considering all things, any woman with an ounce of commonsense—not to speak of common caution—would have let sleeping dogs lie?"

He was waiting for an answer.

"What did her uncle, the Colonel, say to that?"

"Oh, him," he intimated with an incredible sneer. "In the Volunteers! I was speaking as man to man."

"And she didn't even wait the two or three days, then?"

"It was the 3rd of July," he repeated. "After tidying things up for the day—and by that time, mind you, every drop of water had to be brought in buckets across the burnt-up fields from a drying-up pond half a mile away. But it was done. I did it. After finishing, I say, all the rest of the morning chores, I was sitting there thinking of getting a snack of lunch and then what to do next, when I heard a cough—her door had opened; and then her footstep on the stairs—slippers." He held up his forefinger as if for caution, and he was speaking with extreme deliberation as if, with eyes and senses fixed on the scene, he were intent to give me the exactest of records in the clearest of terms. "And I said to myself, 'She's coming! and it's all to begin again!' I said it; I knew it. 'And face it out? . . . then—me?'" He shook his head a little like a cat tasting water, but the eyes he showed me were like the glazed windows of an empty shop. "No, I made myself scarce. I said to myself: 'Better keep your distance. Make yourself scarce; keep out of it.' And heaven help me I had been doing my best to forget what had passed the night before and to face what was to come. And so—I went out.

"It was early afternoon: sultry, like now. And I wan-

dered about the fields. I must have gone miles and never met a soul. But if you ask me to say where, then all I can say is, Isn't one field the living image of another? And what do you see when your mind isn't there? All round Winstock way—lanes, hedges, corn fields, turnips —tramp and tramp and tramp. And it was not until about seven o'clock that evening that I got back again. Time for supper. I got out the crockery and—and raked out the fire. No sign of nobody, nor of my sister either —though there was nothing in that: she had a habit of sitting up at her bedroom window, and looking out, just with her hands in her lap. And the house as still as a —as still as a Church.

"I loafed about a bit in the kitchen. Call *her?* Well, hardly! There was plenty to do. As usual. The supper, and all that. The village woman had left about eleven that morning—toothache. She owned to it. Not that that put me about. I can cook a boiled egg and a potato well enough for most Christians. But hot meals—meals for—well, anyhow, there was nothing hot that evening. It was about seven-thirty by then, I suppose; and I was beginning to wonder. Then I thought I'd go out in the yard and have a look at the runabout—an old Ford, you know—I hadn't had time then for weeks to keep it decent. When I got to the shed, there was a strange cat eating up some fish-bones; and when I looked in, it was gone."

"You mean the Ford?"

"Yes, the Ford. There wasn't a sign of it. That froze me up, I can tell you, for there had been gipsies about a day or two before. I rushed into the house and called out, 'Miss Dutton, are you there? The Ford's

gone.' No answer. I can tell you I was just like a frenzied man. I looked in the drawing-room—teapot and cup on a tray but empty: just sunshine streaming in as if nothing had happened. Then I looked into her little parlour: boudoir, she called it. Nothing doing. Then I went upstairs and tapped on her bedroom door. 'Miss Dutton,' I said, 'have you seen anything of the Ford? It's gone.' And then I looked in. That was the queer thing about it. They all said that. That it never occurred to me, I mean, that she was not in the car herself. But what I say is—how can you think of everything before you say it, and wasn't it I myself that *said* I had said it?

"Anyhow, I looked in: I suppose a man can do *that* in his own house and his car gone from under his very eyes! And believe me, the sight inside was shocking. I'm a great stickler myself for law and order, for neatness, I mean. I had noticed it before: it irritated me; in spite of all her finery, she was never what you would call a tidy woman. But that room beat everything. Drawers flung open, dresses hugger-mugger, slippers, bags, beadwork, boxes, gimcracks all over the place. But not a sign of her. I looked—everywhere. She wasn't there, right enough. Not—not a sign of her. She was gone. And—and I have never seen her since."

The rain was over, and the long sigh he uttered seemed to fill the whole tea-shop as if it were a faint echo of the storm which had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The sun was wanly shining again, gilding the street.

"You at once guessed, I suppose, the house had been broken into, while you were out?"

He kept his eyes firmly on mine. "Yes," he said. "That's what I thought—at first."

"But then, I think you said a minute or two ago that Miss Dutton *was* actually seen again?"

He nodded. "That's just it," he said, as if with incredulous lucidity. "So you see, the other couldn't have been. The facts were against it. She was seen that very evening," he said, "and driving my Ford. By more than one, too. Our butcher happened to be outside his shop door, no friend of mine either. It was a Saturday; cutting up pieces for the 4d. and 6d. trays, and he saw her going by: saw the number, too. It was all but broad daylight, though it's a narrow street. It was about seven then, he said, because he had only just wound his clock. There she was; and a good pace too. And who could be surprised if she looked a bit unusual in appearance? It's exactly what you'd expect. You don't bolt out of a house you have lived in comfortable for two or three years as neat as a new pin."

"What was wrong with her?"

"Oh, the man was nothing better than a fool, though promptitude itself when it came to asking a good customer to settle up. He said he'd have hardly recognised her. There, in my car, mind you, and all but broad daylight."

"But surely," I said as naturally as possible, "even if it is difficult sometimes to trace a human being, it is not so easy to dispose of a car. Wasn't that ever found?"

He smiled at me, and in a more friendly way than I should have deemed possible in a face so naturally inexpressive.

"You've hit the very nail on the head," he assented.

"They did find the car—on the Monday morning. In fact it was found on the Sunday by a young fellow out with his sweetheart, but they thought it was just waiting —picking flowers, or something. It had been left inside a fir-copse about a couple of hundred yards from a railway station, a mile or so out of the town."

"Just a countryfied little railway station, I suppose? Had the porter or anybody noticed a lady?"

"Countryfied—ay, maybe: but the platform crowded with people going to and fro for their week's marketing, besides a garden party from the Rectory."

"The platform going into the town?"

"Yes, that's it," said my friend. "Covering her tracks."

At that moment I noticed one of our waitress's bright-red "Eighteens" whirling past the tea-shop door. It vanished.

"She had had a letter that morning—postmark Chicago," the now far-too-familiar voice pushed on industriously. "The postman noticed it, being foreign. It's my belief *that* caused it. But mind you, apart from that, though I'm not, and never was, complaining, she'd treated me, well——" But he left the sentence unfinished while he clumsily pushed about with his spoon in the attempt to rescue a fly that had strayed in too far in pursuit of his sweet cold coffee. He was breathing gently on the hapless insect.

"And I suppose, by that time, you had given the alarm?"

"Given the alarm?" he repeated. "Why?"

The sudden frigidity of his tone confused me a little.

"Why," I said, "not finding Miss Dutton in the house, didn't you let anybody know?"

"Now my dear sir," he said, "I ask you. How was *I* to know what Miss Dutton was after? I wasn't Miss Dutton's keeper; she was perfectly at liberty to do what she pleased, to come and go. How was I to know what she had taken into her head? Why, I thought for a bit it was a friendly action considering all things, that she should have borrowed the car. Mind you, I don't say I wasn't disturbed as well, her not leaving a word of explanation, as she had done once before—pinned a bit of paper to the kitchen table—'Yours with love, Edna'—that sort of thing. Though that was when everything was going smooth and pleasant. What I did first was to go off to a cottage down the lane and enquire there. All out, except the daughter in the wash-house. Not a sight or sound of car or Miss Dutton, though she did recollect the honk of a horn sounding. 'Was it my horn?' I asked. But they're not very observant, that kind of young woman. Silly-like. Besides, she wasn't much more than a child."

"And your sister: where actually was she, after all?"

He looked at me as if once more in compliment of my sagacity.

"That, I take it—to find and question *her,* I mean, was a matter of course. I went up to her room, opened the door, and I can hear myself actually saying it now: 'Have you seen anything of Edna, Maria?'

"It was very quiet in her room—stuffy, too, and for the moment I thought she wasn't there; and then I saw her—I detected her there—sitting in the farthest corner

out of the light. I saw her white face turn round, it must have been covered up. 'Where's Edna, Maria?' I repeated. She shook her head at me, sitting there beyond the window. I could scarcely see her. And you don't seem to have realised that any kind of direct or sudden question always confused her. It didn't seem she understood what I was saying. In my belief it was nothing short of brutal the way they put her through it. I mean that Colonel, as he calls himself. Over and over and over again.

"Well, we weren't in any mood for food, as you may guess, when eight, nine, went by—and no sign of her. At last it was no use waiting any longer; but just to make sure, I went over to the farm two miles or so away —a little off the road, too, she must have taken to the town. We were still pretty friendly there. It was about half-past nine, I suppose, and they had all gone to bed. The dog yelled at me as if it was full moon and he had never seen me before. I threw a handful of gravel up at the old man's window, and I must say, considering all things, he kept his temper pretty well. Specially as he had seen nothing. Nothing whatever, he said.

" 'Well,' I said, speaking up at him, and they were my very words, 'I should like to know what's become of her.' He didn't seem to be as anxious as I was—thought she'd turn up next morning. 'That kind of woman knows best what she's about,' he said. So I went home and went to bed, feeling very uneasy. I didn't like the feel of it, you understand. And I suppose it must have been about three or four in the morning when I heard a noise in the house."

"You thought she had come back?"

"What?" he said.

"I say, you thought she had come back?"

"Yes, of course. Oh yes. And I looked out of my bedroom door over the banisters. By that time there was a bit of moonlight showing, striking down on the plaster and oilcloth. It was my sister, with an old skirt thrown over her nightgown. She was as white as a sheet, and shivering.

" 'Where have you been, Maria?' I asked her in as gentle a voice as I could make it. The curious thing is, she understood me perfectly well. I mean she answered at once, because often I think really and truly she did understand, only that she couldn't as quickly as most people collect her wits as they say.

"She said, mumbling her words, she had been looking for her.

" 'Looking for who?' I said, just to see if she had taken me right.

" 'For her,' she said.

" 'For Edna?' I asked. 'And why should you be looking for Edna this time of night?' I spoke a little more sternly.

"She looked at me, and the tears began to roll down her face.

" 'For God's sake, Maria, why are you crying?' I said.

" 'Oh,' she said, 'she's gone. And she won't come back now.'

"I put my arm round her and drew her down on to the stairs. 'Compose yourself,' I said to her, 'don't shiver and shake like that.' I forgot she had been standing barefoot on the cold oilcloth. 'What do you mean, Gone? Don't take on so. Who's to know she won't

come back safe and sound?' I am giving you the words just as they came out of our mouths.

"'Oh,' she said, 'William, you know better than me —I won't say anything more. Gone. And never knowing that I hadn't forgotten how kind she was to me!'

"'Kind, my girl!' I said. 'Kind! In good part, maybe,' I said, 'but not surely after what she said to you that day?'

"But I could get nothing more out of her. She shrank up moaning and sobbing. She had lost herself again, her hair all draggled over her eyes, and she kept her face averted from me, and her shoulders were all humped, shaking under my hands—you know what women are. So I led her off to her room and made her as comfortable as I could. But all through the night I could hear her afterwards when I went to listen, and talking too.

"You can tell I was by now in a pretty state myself. That was a long night for me. And what do you think: when I repeated that conversation to the Colonel, and the Inspector himself standing by, he as good as told me he didn't believe me. 'Friendly questions'! I could have wrung his nose. But then by that time my poor sister couldn't put two words together, he bawled at her so; until even the Inspector said it was not fair on her, and that she wouldn't be any use, anyhow, whatever happened."

Once again there fell a pause in my stranger's disjointed story. He took two or three spoonfuls in rapid succession of his half-melted ice-cream. Even though the rain and the storm had come and gone, the air was not appreciably cooler, or rather it was no less heavy and stagnant. Our waitress had apparently given us up as

lost souls, and I glanced a little deprecatingly at the notice, "No gratuities," on the wall.

"How long did the drought last after that?" I inquired at last.

"The drought?" said my friend. "The questions you ask! Why, it broke that very night. Over an inch of rain we had in less than eight hours."

"Well, that, at any rate, I suppose, was something of a comfort."

"I don't see quite why," he retorted.

"And then you informed the Police?"

"On the Sunday." He took out a coloured silk handkerchief from the pocket of his neat pepper-and-salt jacket, and blew his nose. It is strange how one can actually anticipate merely from the general look of a man such minute particulars as the trumpeting of a nose. Strange, I mean, that all the parts and properties of human beings seem to hang so closely together, as if in positive confusion. Anyhow, the noise resounded through the glass-walled marbled room as sharp as cockcrow.

"Well," he said, "that's where I stand. Looking at me, you wouldn't suppose perhaps that everything that a man wants most in this world has been destroyed and poisoned away. I had no call perhaps to be confiding in a mere stranger. But you couldn't credit the relief. I have nothing left now. I came up here to lose myself in the noise—so shocking quiet it is, there, now. But I have to go back—can't sleep much, though: wake up shouting. But what's worst is the emptiness: it's all perished. I don't want anything now. I'd as lief die and have done with it, if I could do it undriven. I've never seen a desert, but I reckon I know what the inside of one's

like now. I stop thinking sometimes, and get dressed without knowing it. You wouldn't guess that from my appearance, I dare say. But once begin living as you feel underneath living *is,* where would most of us be? They have hounded me on and they've hounded me down, and presently they'll be sealing me up, and me never knowing from one day to another what news may come of—of our friend. And my sister gone and all."

"She isn't 'missing' too, I hope?" As I reflect on it, it was a vile question to have put to the man. I don't see how anything could have justified it. His face was like a burnt-out boat. The effect on him was atrocious to witness. His swarthy cheek went gray as ashes. The hand on the marble table began to tremble violently.

"Missing?" he cried. "She's dead. Isn't *that* good enough for you?"

At this, no doubt because I was hopelessly in the wrong, I all but lost control of myself.

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed in a low voice. "What do you mean by speaking to me like that? Haven't I wasted the better part of a Saturday afternoon listening to a story which I could have picked up better in your own county newspaper? What's it all to me, may I ask? I want to have nothing more to do with it—or you either."

"You didn't say that at the beginning," he replied furiously, struggling to his feet. "You led me on."

"Led you on, by God? What do you mean by such a piece of impudence? I say I want nothing more to do with you. And if that's how you accept a kindness, take my advice and keep your troubles to yourself in future. Let your bygones *be* bygones. And may the Lord have mercy on my soul."

It was a foul outburst, due in part, I hope, to the heat; in part of to the suffocating dehumanising fœtor which spreads over London when the sun has been pouring down on its bricks and mortar as fiercely as on the bones and sands of some Eastern mud village.

My stranger had sat down again abruptly, had pushed his ice away from him and covered his face with his hands. His shoulders were jumping as if with hiccups. It was fortunate perhaps that at the moment there was no other eater in the café. But the waitresses were clustered together at the counter. They must have been watching us for some little time. And the manageress was there, too, looking at us like a scandalised hen over her collar through her pince-nez. We were evidently causing a disturbance—on the brink of a "scene." A visionary placard flaunted across my inward eye: *Fracas in a Restaurant.*

I too sat down, and beckoned peremptorily to the young lady who had been so attentive about the 'bus.

"My bill, please," I said—"this gentleman's and mine."

And then, foolishly, I added, "It's hot, isn't it?"

She made no reply until, after damping her lead pencil she had added up her figures and had handed me between her finger-tips the mean scrap of paper. Then she informed me crisply, in fastidious Cockney, that some people seemed to find it hotter than most, and that it was nearly closing time, and would I please pay at the desk.

My accomplice had regained a little of his self-restraint by now. He put out a wavering hand and took up his hard felt hat. It was almost incredible that so marked a change should have come over so insensitive a face in that brief space of time. Its touch of bravado, its cold

clear stare as of a watchful dog, even the neatness of it, had disappeared. He looked ten years older—lost and abandoned. He put out his other hand for the check. It was a curious action for a man with an intense closeness —if not meanness—clearly visible on his features: "I should prefer, if you don't mind, to pay my bill myself," he said.

"Not at all," I replied brusquely. "It was my ice-cream. I must apologise for having been so abrupt."

He tried to smile; and it was like the gleam of a sickly evening sunshine after heavy winter rain.

"It's broken me: that's all I can say," he said. "What I say is, you read such things in the newspapers, but you don't know what they mean to them as are most concerned. I don't see how you can."

I hesitated. A furious contest—dim spread-eagled figures silhouetted, as it were, against a background of utter black—seemed to be proceeding in some dream in my mind, a little beyond actual consciousness. "Well," I blurted, "I hope time will make things better. I can guess what I should feel like myself in similar circumstances. If I were you, I should . . ." But at sight of him, the words, I am thankful to say, faded out before I could utter them. 'If I were you'—how easy! But how is that metamorphosis possible?

He looked at his hat; he looked at his ice-cream, now an insipid mush; he looked anxiously and searchingly at the table—marked over with the hieroglyphics of dark ugly marble. And at last he raised his eyes—those inexpressive balls of glass—and looked at me. He changed his hat from his right to his left hand, and still looking at me, hesitated, holding the empty hand out a little

above the table. Then turning away, he drew it back. I pretended not to have noticed the action. "There should be another Eighteen in a few minutes," I volunteered. "And I think I noticed a stopping-place a few yards down."

Nevertheless I couldn't for the moment leave him there —to the tender mercies of those censorious young waitresses in their exquisitely starched caps. "I am going that way," I said. "Shall I see you into it?"

"It's the heat," he said. "No, thank you. You have been a . . ."

With a gasp I repelled as well as I could the distaste for him that was once more curdling as if with a few drops of vinegar my very blood. What monsters of hatred and uncharitableness we humans can be! And what will *my* little record look like, I wonder, when the secrets of all hearts are opened.

It seemed for the time being as though the whole of my right arm had become partially paralysed. But with an effort I put out my hand at last; and then he, too, his —a large green solitaire cuff-link showing itself against his wristband as he did so. We shook hands—though I doubt if a mere fleshly contact can express much while the self behind it is dumb with instinctive distaste.

Besides, the effect on him even of a friendly action as frigid as this was horribly disconcerting. It reminded me of ice pitted and crumbling in a sudden thaw. He seemed to have been reduced to a state of physical and spiritual helplessness, as if by an extremity of emotion, or by a drug. It was nauseating. It confused me and made me ashamed and miserable. I turned away abruptly; paid our bill at the desk, and went out.

The Connoisseur

Park Street

T was a narrow discreet street, and, in this late evening twilight, all but deserted. There had been rain, bringing with it an earthy fragrance from the not far distant park, and small clear puddles of water filled the hollows of the paving-stones. Clumsily picking his way between them, St. Dusman came shuffling along between the houses to keep a rather belated tryst. He paused now and again to examine the numbers on the fanlights, and at last halted, at No. 13; where he stood for a few moments peering in over the spear-headed palisade that guarded its area. As yet the curtains of the shallowly curved window abutting on the street had not been drawn nor its shutters closed.

From a candelabrum on a lacquer Chinese table in the midst of the room electric tapers cast their beams upon the exquisite objects that stood around them. This sharp metallic light bathed ivory and porcelain, the wax-like flowers in their slim vase, the few pictures, as if they were the sacred relics of a shrine.

The old creature's eyes gazed vaguely through their magnifying spectacles at this scene of still life, then groped onward towards the figure of a man, as yet apparently in his early thirties, who now stood in the doorway, slim, sleek, dark—as if for foil to the very vase on

the table with its pale green leaves and flowers. His neat head was stooping forward and inclined a little towards his left shoulder, for at that moment with intense interest and vigilance he was vainly endeavouring to see the old man out there in the darkening street as clearly as St. Dusman could see him.

The old man hesitated no longer. With the aid of its wrought steel handrail he mounted the three shallow steps of the outer door, under its narrow shell-shaped porch, and rapped softly with his knuckles on the panel. The stranger himself hastened to open it, though for an instant or two he seemed to have paused with fingers on its catch, and after the briefest scrutiny of the face of his visitor from penetrating green-grey eyes, led him, almost as though surreptitiously, into the very room which the saint had surveyed from without. And he himself drew their curtains over the windows.

"You may not have been expecting me, Mr. Blumen?" said the old man courteously, still a little breathless. "Although, indeed, I am a little late. My friends detain me at times. And this is my last errand for the day."

Mr. Blumen's eyes were now steadily fixed on his visitor's face. "I must confess," he replied, "that I was *not* expecting you. Not, I mean, to-night."

"But you had not entirely forgotten me?" the old man pressed him whimsically. "You have now and then given a passing thought to me? I leave footprints outside."

Mr. Blumen smiled, at least with his lips. "You bring back at least one old memory—an experience often repeated when I was a small boy in Bath, you know. The experience, I mean, of being 'called-for.' Now and then,

for there are many kinds of parties, it was a relief, a positive godsend."

There was just a hint of the formal in this rapid and not unfriendly speech. It had been uttered too in a low-ish voice, though, even at that, the characteristic slight lisp and blurred r's had been detectable.

The old saint peered up at the young man over his thick-glassed spectacles. "I can well understand it," he said at last. "It meant returning home. Ours is a longer journey, Mr. Blumen."

The dark eyes had sharpened. "It *has* a goal, then?"

"Surely!" replied the old man. "Were you uncertain even of that? Not," he added candidly, "not that the metaphor carries us quite all the way. Lassitude follows after most races; and what are called goals and prizes may be disappointing. But what—if I may venture—suggested to you that any journey in this world, in any precise meaning of the word, has an *end?*"

"Well," replied Mr. Blumen, "there are many philosophies, and one may listen to all without being persuaded to accept any."

"But hardly without divining any—just on one's own account?" returned the old man, almost as if he were smilingly bent on coaxing a secret out of a child. "Wouldn't that be a little unfair to the mere facts of the case? Now I'll be bound, Mr. Blumen, when you were a small boy you must have dreamed now and then? So far at least you were conscious of circles within circles —and without—so to say?"

There was remarkably little of the childish in the keen, ashen face confronting him. The dark, large-pupilled eyes had wandered almost stealthily from point to point

of the objects around them, every one of which seemed now to be flashing secret signals one to the other in this motionless creek of air.

"Well possibly," replied Mr. Blumen. "But even a pessimist would agree that it is as well to make the best one can of the one 'circle'—without vexing oneself too much with shallow and futile speculations concerning any other. And optimists; well——" a slight shrug of the narrow shoulders completed the sentence. "I must be quite candid, though. I am unconscious of the least wish in the world to bid adieu to what they call 'things as they are'—to things, that is, as they appear to me to be. I realise, none the less, that you have obligations. And—thank you for fulfilling them so considerately."

At this, the old man folded one hand over the other under his loose sleeves, sighed, and quietly seated himself on the edge of a chair that stood near-by. "Thank *you*, Mr. Blumen," he said; "I will enjoy a moment's needed rest."

"Forgive me," cried the other hastily, turning as he spoke towards the tiny sideboard—riding there in the offing, as it were, of this bright inward pool of silence, with its delicate cargo of Venetian glass and wine.

But his visitor pleasantly waved this little courtesy aside. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Blumen," he explained, "and you are exceedingly tolerant, I haven't the head for it. And though I am familiar with our route—almost excessively familiar—we shall still need our combined cold wits to face it out. You were saying 'things as they are'—a stimulating phrase enough in itself. Still, I have no very close knowledge of what you call the world; apart, I mean, from my daily duties. May

I assume that 'things as they are' now surround us?" The aged eyes peered carefully and cautiously once more through their thick glasses. "That is so? Please, then, tell me why you are disinclined to leave them. You have seen a good deal of them?"

Mr. Blumen drew in his underlip as if to moisten it with his tongue. He paused; in search of words. "Well," he ventured at last, "partly, I suppose, because of those weeds of superstitious fear planted in one's mind when one is young; partly because life *can* be uncommonly entertaining; and partly because I dislike leaving what I have spent a good many years making my own."

"Making your own!" echoed the gentle old voice a little drily; though there was a twinkle in its owner's eye. "But you will not be ceasing to *think* when we make a start. And surely it is only thoughts, hopes, desires, dreams, and so on that you can really claim as having been made your own.

"In a sense," agreed his quarry. "But then I'm no Platonist, either. One's friends, one's pursuits, one's possessions"—he made a little gesture with his right hand that till that moment had been reposing in his pocket—"surely they are the very proofs of one's *self* that one hungers for. Not of course that they can be permanent; or need be."

"Friends are friends," said the old man. "I can understand that. But possessions? I take it, Mr. Blumen, that you would include in that category what I see around me. Perhaps you would tell me why you value them so highly. Were there not things less perishable to possess; things that of their own nature would be less inclined to bid *you* good-bye? That old image of Kuan

Yin over there, for example, is she any the more or less a symbol than the very ferocious onion-green dragon displaying his tail on that pot yonder? Better both in the imagination, don't you think, Mr. Blumen, than—well, round one's neck? Besides, earth-time is fleeting. Was it ever, do you feel, worth while to do more than merely borrow its energies, apart from much else; and be grateful?"

"To whom?" Mr. Blumen blurted.

"That is a question," retorted the old man serenely, hugging his hands a little closer under their wide sleeves—"that is a question which it would take rather more earth-time than you and I have at our disposal just now to answer."

The shoulders beneath the neat dinner-jacket slightly lifted themselves. "We don't always expect answers to our questions," he said.

"Well now, see here," said the old man, and he vigorously readjusted his spectacles on the bridge of his broad and rather stumpy nose. 'There are many similar things to these in every house in every neighbouring street, are there not? Is it just the sense of possession that is the charm? Or of being possessed?"

"Things *similar,* perhaps," smiled Mr. Blumen indulgently. "But I need hardly suggest to an adept like yourself that many of the specimens around us at this moment are practically unique. And do you mean to imply, sir, that the beauty and rarity of a thing amount to nothing in what perhaps—whether expressed in earth-time or otherwise—you would agree to call the long run?"

"Come, come," said the old man, "surely rarity is the reward of a mere acquisitiveness? While as for beauty;

indeed, Mr. Blumen, in my humble office—a little arduous, too, at times, if I may confess it—there is not much leisure for beauty. Still, I think you will agree that what you and I mean by the word, and so far as we are personally concerned, it depends solely upon the eyes in our heads. And we have a good many, you know. With the exception, too, of the rare flowers on your table—specimens, I suspect, which would hardly be recognised even by their less remote ancestors—everything here, I notice, is—what shall we call it—of human workmanship."

"They are works of art," agreed Mr. Blumen. "They represent years of human skill, human delight, and human devotion and desire. What have you against them? For that matter what has *he* against them who has so punctually provided me with your company this evening?" A very sober countenance now scrutinised Mr. Blumen—and the old man, as if to suit posture to face, seemed to have composed himself even more heavily in his chair. He gazed hard, but made no answer; then turned his head and almost cautiously surveyed the objects around him as one by one they met his eye.

All the *familles* were there: *noire, verte,* and *rose;* each of them signally represented by elegant ambassadors, only the more amiable and acceptable for their extreme age. On half a dozen varieties of gods, on fabulous heroes and monsters renowned in old tales, and on exquisite Tanagra figures, and shapes of beast, bird, and fable, made small in priceless images of stone, earthenware, porcelain, enamel, ivory, metal, alighted his gentle glance. The faintly greenish glass on table and sideboard, like colourless and heatless crystal flame, lifted its

burden of gimcracks, sweetmeats, and liqueurs, a few inches aloft.

The rugs beneath the old man's mud-stained feet by far excelled in blended colour and design the minute French masterpieces in paint, and the worn dimmed tapestry that here and there relieved the delicate gilt of the walls and of the few chairs. A smiling cherub disguised as Father Time stood on tiptoe with uplifted scythe above the minute gilt clock ticking out Mr. Blumen's envious moments upon the carved chimney-piece. The fragile peace around him and his visitor indeed was so tenuous it seemed that at any moment it might explode, and shatter itself into its component atoms. When the old man's voice again broke the silence, it was positively as if he himself had shattered in sheer actuality some crystal image lifting itself into the still, elastic air.

"You would, I believe, Mr. Blumen, be surprised," that voice was murmuring gently, "you would be surprised at the range of humanity that lies reflected around us. Here and there our company—and, as you well know, whatever a man does is to some extent a mirror of what he is: here and there (and forgive me for confessing it) that company, I say, is detestable to the last degree. You will be well rid of it. There are poisons that enter by the eye as well as in the blood. What is even worse—except for that moth searching the shadows over there, whose presence no doubt is explained by my poor company—I perceive here no faintest sign of life. Of life, I mean, here and now."

A thin dark cloud had mounted into Mr. Blumen's pallid face. "If you had consented to delay your visit even by half an hour," he retorted, with a contemptuous

gesture towards the two chairs drawn up to the table, "your last remark would hardly have been to the point."

"Do not misdoubt me," replied his visitor courteously. "I have no very acute intelligence. But I have heard the rumours of busy domestic sounds from below; and I detect preparations for a visitor. But I meant by life a happy freedom of the spirit rather than mere amusement of the body. A life *delighted* in."

"A pet canary, perhaps?" But the voice was almost too tired to be insolent.

"Why not indeed?" replied the old man, "if you took a lively pleasure in it. Still, cages remain cages; and you yourself would agree with me that heart and soul you yourself are something of a recluse. And this I gather is your hermitage. And I have seldom in a pretty wide experience of such things seen a cage more elaborate. You are content with it?"

Mr. Blumen stared a little heavily into the face of his visitor. "If you know anything of the society in this neighbourhood, and if you mean that I enjoy solitude, then I am in complete agreement with you."

"So would any chrysalis be," said his visitor almost gaily. "I grieve with all my heart that you are compelled to resign things you have grown to care for—hoarded, Mr. Blumen; that it is now too late, I mean, to have *given* them away."

Mr. Blumen laid a gentle hand upon the corner of the chimney-piece. For an instant their ashen wax-like lids descended over his green-grey eyes.

"And now," went on his visitor gently, rising to his feet, "that last taxicab has passed out of hearing. There

is more than half a moon to-night over Whinnimoor. It is time for us to be off."

SASURAT

The soft white glare of snow fringed the crests of the mountains that surrounded the tortuous valley beneath them. Blossoming trees and coloured drifts of flowers mounted up almost to their frozen margin. The sun ascending into the dark blue vault of the sky, though it was but an hour or two after break of day, cast beams so fierce upon their flanks that the lawn-like mists were already swirling in the heat, showering their dew on leaf and flower and rock.

St. Dusman had made his way into the valley in the small hours, and now sat drowsing on a stone beside which roared a torrent of green water. He had removed his sandals in order to lave his feet in the coldness, and now, it would appear, as if every flame-plumed bird in the thickets around him, and every puffing breath of wind that came wandering across the precipitous gorges, were inviting the spirit of the old man to return to the world, to slip out of sleep and waken again. With mouth agape, however, he nodded on. Flies and butterflies of innumerable dyes flashed and fluttered in the empty air around him. Fish of hardly less brave a livery sported with fin and tail over the coloured stones that tessellated the bed of the stream that flowed beside him.

Two or three hundred feet above, at the foot of one of the lower peaks glittering in the sunrays with rainbow flashes from its exposed face of rock and quartz, a moun-

tain leopard now stole into view, lifting its gentle head into the sunshine. With twitching brows and whiskers, it snuffed the morning air, while its amber eyes rested for a moment upon the stooping figure of the old man crouched up and motionless in sleep far beneath him. With a faint uneasy mew, it then lifted its gaze upwards towards a pair of eagles circling in the enormous cavity of the now starless heavens. Then curling its narrow beautiful body upon the sward under the rocky wall of the mountain, it couched with head on paws, and composed itself to sleep.

It was the scream of a parrakeet that pierced through the old man's dreams at last. His eyes opened, he raised his head and looked around him. Where all had been dark with the gloom of night was now radiant with day. He rose to his feet and shuffled towards a huge spreading tree from amid whose swaying branches of foliage, almost brushing the ground beneath them with their blooms, he could wait and watch unseen. Resting his hand upon a smooth bough of the tree a little above his head, he contemplated the scene around him.

A smile spread over his seamed, weather-worn old face as his eyes roved to and fro. For twenty or thirty paces distant from him on a smooth drift of sward stood, as it were, a low small arbour woven of dried grass and rushes, and roofed with patches of moss and coloured feathers even. No bigger than a beehive though it was, it showed as conspicuous on the turf as a green oasis in the wilderness, or an isle of coral rising gently with its palms and tamarisks from out of the sea.

Some small creature, it was evident, had diligently col-

lected together for its pleasure a few of the more sparkling and garish objects that lay within reach—muscous growths, for example, that flourished only in the denser and darker thickets of the surrounding forest, the bark of a silvery shrub that ventured nearest of all on the hill-tops to the never melting snows, a fossil shell or two. While scattered about the rounded entrance to the arbour lay bright pebbles, bright "everlasting" flowers, scraps of quartz, and what appeared to be flakes of a shining metal.

The old man sighed, though he did not stop smiling, as he feasted himself on these simple artifices and awaited the appearance of the hidden designer. The hours of eternity are no longer than those of time. Contrariwise, a century of earth's seasons may be in thought but as transitory as the colours of a rainbow. But, whatever his ruminations might be, St. Dusman made no attempt to suppress the look of humorous compassion that now wrinkled his face at this showing of yet another renewed attempt to make a haven in the wilderness.

He had not very long to wait. For sunbeams had but just gilded the fringe of the water in its cold rocky channel, when there came a sudden scurry of wings from above his sheltering tree, and there alit on the very stone that had been his nocturnal stool, a bird.

From claw to crest it reared itself about eighteen inches from its resting-place, and in plumage was of a uniform saddish green, though tinged at the extremities of its primaries and of its tail feathers with a dull cinnamon, its breast deepening to a faint shot purple towards the belly.

With dipping and sidling head it surveyed the minute

surrounding plateau, showing in its quick movements a faint unease as if its senses were dimly aware of strange and dangerous company.

So translucent was the surrounding air that even at this distance the old man could mark the silvery rim to the iris of its eye, and could count the horned, outspread claws that clutched the stone. He had long since descried too, even to the delicate markings of its rosettes, the leopard apparently sleeping away its vigil on the height above.

The bird that had thus alighted on the stone near-by, appeared to be in quest of company. It bowed and becked now a little this way, now a little that; it stretched and sleeked a wing until every speck on its neutral-patterned feathers displayed itself in the sun. Then crouching lower and amorously into its soft plumage, with stealthy movements it twisted its neck upon its shoulders until its beak, as if in maternal joy and quietude, lay gently upon its bosom. The old man smiled at the realisation that while this last gesture had come straight from nature's teaching, what had preceded it seemed to have been learned by mimicry and to have been practised with reluctance.

A slight stir within the arbour now caught his attention. Instantly the visitor on the stone drew herself down and sped swiftly into cover behind and beneath the boulders that lay along the margin of the stream. Many minutes passed. The sun swept upward into the heavens, rejoicing in his strength. By infinite degrees the shadows cast by mountain peak and crest moved in a vast curve like the hands of an enormous timepiece. At faintest touch of their chill in its lair the leopard had stirred, lifted and

stretched itself, and after one swift glance over the scene spread out beneath it, had vanished from sight, as if in obedience to a secret cue.

And now from out the pitch-black arch of its nesting-place, issued into the blazing glare of the morning a creature compared with whom the visitor to its domains was but as a handmaid in the train of the Queen of Sheba compared with King Solomon in all his glory. Its crested head was of molten gold—a gold which swam and rippled down towards its folded wings into a lively green seen only in rare mosses and in the shallows of the oceans. Green, blue, and purple then mingled their beauty. The wing tips were black as soot; the tail coverts, interrupted with snow, resembled them; while above them, arched over its back, flowed upwards two paler shafts terminating in a lyre-shaped pattern of hues almost indistinguishable the one from the other, as they glinted, flashed, and melted in the sun.

This lordly creature, having surveyed a moment the surrounding day, trod delicately onwards to its bathing-place; and after a while returned once more to preen itself amid the odd riches which it had collected and strown in devices recognisable only by itself, around its arbour. And not until now stole out again its humble infatuated visitor.

The old man almost laughed outright to see the disdain with which his lordship refused to recognise his visitor's presence there. Indolently, methodically he continued his exquisite toilet. While she, poor creature, as if now utterly ashamed of her former wiles, cowered half in shadow, half in sun, gently observing him. "O Lucifer,

Son of the Morning," muttered the old man—beads of sweat, in spite of the sheltering branches above him glistening on his bald pate, "O Lucifer, Son of the Morning, by pride fell the Angels."

Sheer curiosity seemed at last to overcome her as she drew a little nearer to watch the adored one rearrange his treasury. Now one shell, then another, a fragment of quartz or of glinting metal, he lifted with his beak and disposed in place. There appeared to be singularly little method in his peculiar hobby, for as often as not he returned to its former place in the pattern what but a moment or two before he had with extreme deliberation deposited elsewhere. Possibly some outlying province of his bird-like mind and attention was concerned with his faithful visitor. But not the faintest ripple of neck or plume betrayed it. His complete heed seemed to be solely for his pretty collection.

"How strange it is," thought the old man, "that even in the simplest of her creatures nature consistently endeavours to reach the least bit farther than she can stretch." There was something almost human in the queer devices these creatures of the same kin and kind were exhibiting, though neglect and contempt were steadily reducing the unwanted one to her own sovran and instinctive self. She rose out of the shadow, displayed once more an indolent wing, and emitted from her throat a curious, bubbling, guttural note.

And apparently, as if at last in heed of her entreaties, her disdainful idol had suddenly thrust forward his golden head; every feather on his body seeming to bristle and roughen itself as he stared. Yet even this could be but small comfort to her meekness and vanity, for his silver-

lined eyes were now fixed not upon herself but a few paces beyond her.

There was a deathly pause. For an instant or two the small lovely universe around them, snow-masked mountain-top to brawling stream, seemed to have been swept up in a soundless swoon. Then, as if at a signal, three sentient objects flashed into movement, so rapid as to be individually indistinguishable.

With a mighty whirr of wing, scattering with its talons as it rose the shells and pebbles strown around it, the Bird of the Arbour flashed into the air; and the crouching leopard leapt towards its prey.

Distracted an instant by the foe swooping to attack it, the beast swerved in its leap, missing by a few inches its assured victim, succeeding merely in tearing out a few dull feathers from her wing. She screamed piteously as she fled, then turned too late to observe what had befallen. Plunging with beak and claw, the master of the arbour had cowed for a moment her assailant. The leopard crouched snarling, with lashing tail, defending its eyes against plunging beak and claw. Then suddenly, and with one lightning buffet of its paws, it leapt into the air, and smote its aggressor down.

St. Dusman drew his roughened hand over his forehead; and seizing his staff issued out from his retreat towards the fray. If he had intended to intervene to any purpose in what was passing, he had come too late. After one glimpse of this advancing Strangeness, the leopard with cringing body turned swiftly and fled.

The old man approached the wounded and dying bird, which feebly endeavoured to beat off his advances. He raised it gently in his arms, and carrying it back into the

shadow of its arbour, laid it down among its treasures. The creature's dimming eye gazed vacantly on these vanishing possessions.

"Poor soul, poor soul," the old man whispered. Then hastening down to the stream, he dipped the hem of his outer garment into the water and returning, squeezed out a few drops into its yawning bill.

Strange changes of hue seemed to be chasing, like wind over wheat, across its miraculous plumage. Its glazing eye was fixed, hardly in terror now, but in mute hopeless entreaty, upon the old man's face.

"There, there, my dear," he said, as if an old bachelor of a hundred generations had somehow learned to croon to a hurt child. "There, there, my dear; it's only time to be whispering adieu again. The longer the journey the more numerous the inns. And perhaps a moment or two's rest in each."

But as he watched its quickening pangs the old man suddenly rebuked himself for his stupidity in not reminding himself that other comfort—tenderer than any human heart could offer—was near at hand. He lifted his eyes and searched the surrounding thickets. It was not yet too late. The carcass of the creature beneath his hands was not yet wholly insensitive. And having moistened once again the pointed tongue within its beak, the old man rose to his feet and shuffled off as quick as his old bones would allow, down into the ravine where brawled the mountain river.

Nor while the morning hours lasted did he attempt to look behind him. He merely sat there lost in reverie.

And since the tongues of the water kept up an incessant roar and babblement, no faintest murmur of the

plaintive farewells behind him told whether, like the fabulous swan, the Bird of the Arbour sings only at the approach of death.

KOOTOORA

Even the keenest eye slowly and circumspectly directing its gaze in as remote an ambience as it could command from any one of the blackened crests that lifted themselves fifteen to twenty feet, like the billows of a frozen sea on this Plain of Kootoora, would have discerned no sign of life. Minute slender steel-coloured midges, it is true, their burnished wings like infinitesimal flakes of mica beating the arid air, their horn-shaped snouts curved beneath their many-prismed eyes, drifted in multitudinous clusters in every hollow. They might be animate ashes.

Specks even more minute circling at ethereal altitudes above the vast crater of distant Ajubajao betokened the haunt of some species of vulture, though what meat nourished them more substantial than the air in which they circuited there was nothing to show.

Their towering vans commanded, however, an immense range of scene, and they long since must have descried from so dizzying a coign, a tiny erect shape scrambling toilsomely from out of the east towards the centre of this wild and hideous plateau. From crest to crest of the parched savanna of lava, now pausing to recover his breath and to survey what lay before him, now sliding and swaying into the yawning hollow beneath him; clambering to his feet when some unnoticed obstacle or more dangerous glissade had sent him sprawling; he pushed steadily on.

The Connoisseur

In his pertinacity, in the serene indomitableness of his age-raddled countenance he resembled no less a personage than the first Chinese patriarch, Bodhidharma, as—muffled in his mantle—he is depicted crossing the Yangtze river, his broad soles poised upon a reed.

For this very reason, maybe, the vultures of Ajubajao wheeled no nearer. Or it may be that a pilgrim or traveller who of his own free will, or at the promptings of a bizarre romance, or in service of some incalculable behest, dares the confines of a region as barren as this, quickly dissipates whatever pleasant juices his body may contain. Or it may be some inscrutable intuition in those carrion-fed brains had revealed that destiny had him in keeping beneath her brazen wing. Abject and futile creature though he appeared to be, he came undeviatingly on.

Its last filmy wreaths of sulphurous smoke had centuries before ceased to wreathe themselves from Ajubajao's enormous womb. Leagues distant though its cone must be, its jagged outlines were sharply discernible, cut clean against that southern horizon. The skies shallowly arching the plain of lava that flowed out annularly from its base in enormous undulations, league on league until its margin lay etched and fretted against the eastern heavens—this low-hung firmament was now of a greenish pallor. In its midst the noonday's sun burned rayless like a sullen topaz set in jade.

But utterly lifeless though the plain appeared to be, minute susurrations were occasionally audible, caused apparently by scatterings of lava dust lifted from their hollows on heated draughts of air. These gathering in volume, raised at last their multitudinous voices into a

prolonged hiss, a sustained shrill sibilation as if the silken fringes of an enormous robe were being dragged gently across this ink-black Sahara.

As they subsided once more, drifting softly to rest, a faint musical murmur followed their gigantic sigh, like that of far-distant drums and dulcimers from a secret and hidden borderland. Then this also ceased, and only the plaintive horns of the midges and the scurry of beetles scuttling beneath their shards to and fro in their haunts in the crevices of the lava broke the hush.

In a deep angular hollow of the nearest of these lava dunes, lay basking a serpent, a flat of head and dull of eye, its slightly rufous skin mottled and barred in faintest patternings of slate and chocolate. So still she lay, her markings might appear to be but the vein of an alien stone or metal imbedded in the lava. But now and again, at the dictate of some inward whim, her blunted tail arched itself an inch or two above the floor of its black chamber, emitting a hollow and sinister rattling—as if in admonishment or endearment of the brood of her young that lay drowsing in an apparently inextricable knot of paler colouring near-by.

The hours of Kootoora's morning glided on, revealing little change except an ever increasing torridity, until the thin air fairly danced in ecstasy—like an exquisitely tenuous gas boiling in a pot—above every heat-laved arch and hollow. The skies assumed a yet paler green, resembling that of verdigris, and deepening towards the north to a dull mulberry. Strange tremors now shook the air, and thicker-crusted though its skin might be than any leviathan, a sinister insecurity haunted the plain.

Here took its walks that spectre, danger, but more appallingly bedizened than in any other region of the earth.

Sluggish stirrings, the warning of some obscure instinct, in the serpent's blood now quickened her restlessness, though the lidless eyes set in that flat and obtuse head betrayed no glimmerings of intelligence or fear. She drew in closer to her brood, and again and yet again her rattle drummed sullenly in the heat. A sound alien from any experience that had ever been hers in these familiar haunts had broken the silence. It was the footstep of approaching fear.

Writhing swiftly beneath and towards the face of the lava incline, wherein a black splash marked the crannied entrance of her secret chamber, she swept aside the fragments of dried skin which she had sloughed in bygone years. An increasing movement in the lively tangle behind her showed that her last insistent summons had been heeded. One by one her restless younglings disentangled their coils from the general knot, and slid noiselessly into cover. But a few yet remained, semi-torpid, and, as her inscrutable wits warned her, in imminent danger beneath the glare of the sun, when suddenly the presence and influence of a human shape struck down across the lava wall; and the diffused purple shadow cast by the rayless sun lay over its hollow.

The body that caused it was invisible to the serpent. But her rattle sounded unceasingly, as with groping coils she turned now this way, now that, in endeavour to repel this menace to her solitude and her young's safety. Rearing herself at last in a blind fury of terror and anguish, with blunt head and flickering tongue she struck again

and again not at the dreadful human gently surveying her out of his smiling yet anguished face, as draggled, parched, and half-fainting he watched her every movement, but merely at the insensitive shadow that overhung her lair.

The hollow desperate thumping of her slenderly boned head knocking its own knell grew fainter. But the last of her brood had made its way into safety before, bruised and bleeding, it drooped motionless in the dust. At this the old man scrambled down into the hollow. It had been an arduous journey for what might seem so trivial an errand, but there was no symptom of impatience in his gestures as, having moistened with spittle the ball of his thumb, he gently smeared the muzzle of his victim.

Then he too bent his head, heedless of the still feebly flickering tongue, and seemed to be whispering into the creature's sense some far-brought message of his own.

And, yet again, from across the parched precipitous flanks of Ajubajao, moved, as it were, a vast suspiration of wind, sulphurously hot, of a dense suffocating odour, bestirring in its course the hovering multitudes of the midges, and driving before it a thin cloud of lava dust, as the wind drives shadow across the flats of a sea. Yet again that insidious whispering filled the quiet; and the remote dulcimers tattooed their decoy.

The saint crouched low, hooding as best he could beneath his mantle his eyes, mouth, and nostrils against the smothering skirring particles. A minute whirlpool of air came dancing like a host of dervishes into the she-serpent's hollow. Lifting the dried scaly fragments of her discarded skin, it dispersed them here, there, everywhere, in its minute headlong rout . . .

The Connoisseur

PRINCE AHMAT NAIGUL

The gloom of night lay over the dense forests that spread themselves like a pall over the face of the earth on either side of the high road—that immeasurable causeway from north of the Great River for countless leagues to the sea. The skies above their motionless crests were fiery with stars. Immediately in front of the horsemen indeed, who were now rapidly approaching along the dim white benighted track on their many-days' journey from the northern mountains to the Winter Palace that reared its walls and cupolas upon the precipitous banks of the river, stood (rivalling each the other) above the distant fret of trees, and but a few degrees apart, silver Venus and the flaming Dog-Star.

The horsemen—the scarlet of their head-dresses and their cloaks scarcely discernible in this dense dusk—rode so far in advance of the cavalcade which was following after them that the dust they raised in passing had already floated to rest again before its leaders came into sight.

Under a milk-cupped, leaf-tressed, umbrella-like tree at the edge of the curved dip which the gigantic highway made at this point in its course, owing to the waters of a brackish lake which stretched itself out like a silver dragon in the uttermost glooms of the forest, sat a leper. Forbidden by law to show his shape in village or city, keeping his slender hold on life as best he could, he was a wanderer and a vagrant, dependent on the charity of chance wayfarers. Yet his marred face, glimmering faintly beneath this black canopy of boughs as if with a phosphorescence of its own was in spite of its hideousness benign with magnanimity and peace. His empty dish

—formed out of the shell of an immense nut whose kind hung in huge clusters, like slumbering groups of monkeys, amid one of the forest trees near-by—lay empty beside him. He had composed his emaciated limbs in an attitude of contemplation. But his bleared eyes were now fixed on the torches and lanthorns of the approaching cavalcade, as its horsemen and broad-wheeled coaches came sweeping towards his screened retreat along the road.

The skies were still and windless, sharing as it seemed awhile the quiet of boundless space. Even above the swelling tumult raised by the travellers in their journey, the leper marked the melancholy chantings of the night-birds in the branches above his head and in the thickets around him. Scared by scent and rumour of these human invaders as they approached, the cowering beasts of the forest had long since retired into their further fastnesses, though the bolder of them paused to gaze stealthily out at the leashed hounds, the hooded hawks, the intent or sleeping faces of the convoy, and its living lovely treasure as it swept on its way.

The crackling torch-flames and coloured lanthorns now flung meanwhile a brilliant and moving cloud of luminosity above the causeway; bridle, harness, lance, scabbard, and spur glittered amid the brilliant colourings of the throng.

It was the prince Ahmat Naigul, returning with his bride after the feasting and festivities of their marriage-rites. Coach after coach, burdened with the grandees of his court and retinue, some gently slumbering as they reclined on the low, shallow, cushioned seats within; others chattering and making merry, their eyes gleaming restlessly in the light flung into the dim recesses within their

small wheeled houses from the torches of the horsemen that flanked each vehicle in turn; lumbered heavily by, grinding the powdered flint of the highway into dust yet finer. It seemed this living stream between these darkened walls would never cease.

None the less, there came an interval at last in its garish onset. Then yet another squadron followed after, their milk-white cloaks drawn back over the crimson and silver of their silken under-vests to the cruppers of long-maned horses of the colour of old ivory, their head-dresses surmounted with bejewelled plumes of stiff-spined feathers. They rode in silence, spear in hand, the personal bodyguard of Prince Ahmat Naigul himself, whose coach, lightly swaying on its heavy springs and fashioned of dark wood, ivory and silver, now drew near, drawn by its eight ink-black Tartary draught-horses, their outlandish outriders muffled to the eyes this summer evening in tippets of sable.

The leper rose shivering to his feet, and muffling with his hand the deep-cut copper bell that swung suspended by a hempen cord about his middle, he advanced to the edge of the highway.

And within the royal coach, her head at a gentle angle against its swan-white cushions, Ahmat Naigul's princess lay asleep. About her brow was a green circlet of leaves of the everlasting Ooneetha tree. Her hair hung down on either side her quiet head in braided plaits, dangling upon her slender shoulders and thence upon the smooth inlaid feathers of the hooded cloak that enwrapped her, itself patterned in a linked soft loveliness after the fashion of the same tree. Her face resembled in its quietude and fairness the twilight of an evening in May, and she

reclined in profound slumber, the orange doublet or cuirass of the dark Prince beside her shining like still sheaves of flame against her snow.

His eyes were fixed intently upon the gently moving darkness of the forest that skirted the high road, but ever and again his gaze returned to rest upon the dreaming one beside him. And with bare hand holding his jewelled glove, he would, as it were, make to stroke the feathered folds of her cloak, and then, gently drawing it back, refrain, once more resuming his scrutiny of the vast silence that compassed them in.

At that instant, the gently rocking coach in which he sat lurched slightly on its leathern springs as if the mettlesome horses that drew it had swerved at some unexpected sight or sound. A challenging voice broke into the hush. The wheels slowly ceased to revolve; then came to rest in the dust. With a sharp turn of his head, the Prince stooped forward in the warm gloom of the carriage, and peered out of the window. Delicate shafts of light from the moon that every moment was riding higher into the vacancy of the sky, struck diagonally across, silvering the motionless wall of trees that bordered this bend of the high road.

Full in this flooding radiance, shell in hand, his once white rags dingy and blotched, stood the leper, his matted hair falling lank on either side his half-disfeatured face. The glass-clear pupils beneath the half-closed and fretted lids, were steady in their regard, and were fixed not on the Prince, not apparently on any single object within the shadow of the coach, but as if in contemplation far beyond it. Nevertheless, the first clear glimpse of this whited wayside figure seemed to turn Ahmat Naigul's

body to stone. He desisted even from breathing, nor dared to glance behind him into the shadow, lest the eyes that had been so gently slumbering were now wide agape. And yet the terror that had suddenly assailed a heart at least as courageous as that of any beast that prowled the forests around him had sprung solely from instinct. Such dreadful shows of God's providence as this mendicant were none too rare, even in a country magnanimously governed.

A profound foreboding darkened his mind as in the twilight reflection of the dust and foliage of the wayside Prince Ahmat Naigul now turned to scrutinise his bride. Their lids lay gently on her rounded eyes, though above them the pencilled brows were lifted as if in a faint and delicious astonishment. A rose-like flush had risen into her cheek; her lips were a moth's wing apart. The feathered cloak—needled together of down from the plumage of the swans that haunt the still green creeks of the Great River—almost imperceptibly rose and fell above the quiet breast. No dream even, unless a dream of peace, haunted the spirit within.

Stealthily as a serpent the Prince lifted himself to his feet and stepped down out of the carriage. A tense silence now lay over this loop of the great highway. All tongues had fallen still, and though curiosity had turned not one head by a hair's-breadth in his direction, the complete cavalcade was arrested as if at a secret word of command. It might have been the assemblage of a dream.

With a word to the horseman that now stood dismounted in the dust a little behind the royal coach, Prince Ahmat Naigul passed on, preceded by the leper, and at a few paces distant came to a pause and confronted him.

The wolf of disease had all but gnawed away the nose. The cheek was sunken, the coarse hair hung limp and matted over the eroded ears. The hand that held the bowl to his breast shimmered as if it were inlaid with the scales of a fish, while the other grasped tight its copper bell as if with the talons of a bird. None the less, the glass-like eyes beneath their withering lids continued to gaze out as if in reverie. And not only humility, but an inward gentleness and peace, like that burthening the sails of an incoming ship in a squalid haven, shed their influences from this appalling shape. As in a lamp fashioned out of the coarsest horn, a gentle flame seemed to be burning from within the emaciated physiognomy.

Amid the folds of Ahmat Naigul's dimmed orange and scarlet, the jewels glowed softly in the moonlit atmosphere. His narrow head was flung back a little as if his nostrils were in doubt of the air they breathed. Poverty, it has been recorded, is a gift of the Infinite. And the Prince made a slight obeisance as he drew a ring from his finger and advancing a pace nearer dropped it into the leper's bowl.

"A voice within," he muttered, "tells me that life is brief. I am prepared, Sorrowful One, and of your mercy would be thankful to follow at once."

The leper inclined his head a little towards the Prince, but his eyes remained unstirring.

"How knowest thou," the parched lips gasped, "how knowest thou the message has come for *thee?* Brief though the hour may be, it has its meed of minutes. Empty your mind of all but its most secret memories; have you peace at last?"

"Is rest possible where happiness dwells?" returned Ahmat Naigul.

"Only where rest is is happiness. Your journeyings have brought you here. Nor is it my bidding to call you yet away."

"Who then?" answered the thread-like voice, as the hand beneath the cloak groped upwards towards the dagger concealed beneath it.

"I have your alms," said the leper; "and now, if, as it seems, your highness's will is to lead while others follow, our one and only need is that we exchange the kiss of peace."

And it seemed to the Prince as he stooped forward, resting his trembling hands upon the leper's shrivelled shoulders, that the infinitely aged face beneath his eyes might be that of Death, so utterly serene it was. But no dreadful horror of mortal malady now showed itself. Even the holes, where nostrils as sweet with health as his should be, were now dark casements commanding a secret country; and the narrowed eyes above them were as windows lit with such sunlight as springs reflected from untrodden snows. And as if Ahmat Naigul had sipped of some potent syrup, consciousness lost count for one instant of eternity of time and space. Memories as of a myriad lifetimes swept pleasantly before his eyes.

He drew back at last, and there broke upon his ear, loud as the clang of a temple gong, the clink of a horseman's silver bridle. And even yet the leper had not bent his eyes in his direction. Releasing his bell from his grasp and letting it swing soundlessly above the dust, the leper stooped, and having groped, hoarsely breathing, with his fingers in the dust, raised himself up once more and

thrust out from his body his dried-up palm, at angles with his wrist, and almost as narrow as a monkey's.

Ahmat Naigul in turn outstretched his ungloved hand, from beneath his cloak, and the leper deposited in it an object so minute that the Prince had to press it firmly into the skin with his third finger lest he should lose it.

"The seven ways remain," said the leper. "And the easternmost is the way of life. My gift, Highness, is but for remembrance's sake." And without more ado this Saint of poverty swathed his miserable rags around his body, and turned back towards the blossoming tree where he had been resting his bones beside the waters of the lake.

Ahmat Naigul remounted into his coach, and the horsemen swept on. Time passed unheeded while he sat bolt upright, finger still fixed to palm, his lips like ice above his gums, and his eyes dark with the fear that had clouded them.

And with daybreak, the forest by the roadside now withdrew itself a little. Dark herbage scattered with flowers nodded its dews in the first rays of the sun, as the eyes of the gentle unstirring one beside him opened, to gaze once more at the companion of her journey; and her beauty was like a looking-glass to the beauty of the morning.

"You have been gathering flowers," she said; "and the narrow air herewithin is sweeter far than that of the country in which I have been wandering."

"And what country was that?" whispered the Prince.

"I dreamed," she said, "that you were once a man, and a bird, and a serpent. And I dreamed, Ahmat Naigul, that you were once a scullion to the Sages of the Most

High. And that sometimes—forgive me, beloved—you sipped of their winecups when the veil of the entering-in had hidden you from their sight."

She drew a warm hand from beneath her feathers. "Why," she said, touching his, "your lips are stained with it yet. They are like crimson threads upon a honey ground. And what have you there beneath your finger-tip?"

She paused awhile. But Ahmat Naigul made no movement. "And what have you there beneath your finger-tip?" she questioned him again, a remote accent of disappointment lurking in her voice.

"If, Princess, I had tasted the wine of that other sage whose glance none can resist, what would you say then?"

"Silence is golden, beloved. I would do just like this."

And heedless of sunbeams, of strange eyes amid the thickets, of the birds wandering on their pathless ways from tree to tree, she bent upwards her fair face, and kissed Ahmat Naigul.

But not until the Prince's chief magician had toiled laboriously and for days together over his hoard of polished crystal was the Princess enabled at last to detect with clearness the speck that had lain so closely imprisoned beneath the finger of his hand; and this even though the magician had succeeded in so adjusting his workmanship that it enlarged it almost to the magnitude of a grain of mustard-seed.

So it was still by faith rather than by direct evidence of her gentle senses that she believed the frettings and mouldings on its infinitesimal surface resembled the features and hollows and fairnesses of a human face. And that, her own . . .

Disillusioned

HENEVER Dr. Lidgett's visitor paused in his monologue, so serene seemed the quiet in his consulting-room, so gently from its one high window rilled in the light, that these two strangers might have been closeted together in an oasis of everlasting peace. It was afternoon, and a scene of stillest life. The polished writing-table with its worn maroon leather, the cabinet over the chimney-piece with its surgical instruments and toy balances, the glass and gilt of the engraved portraits on the walls—everything in the room appeared to have sunken long ago into a reverie oceans deep. Even the faint fume of drugs on the air and the persistent tapping of water in a shallow basin behind the dark blue screen only intensified the quiet. They were nothing more than a gentle reminder that our human frailty sometimes requires an anæsthetic, and that it is by moments life comes and goes.

"But I see I am detaining you," the small yet penetrating voice began again out of the large leather-covered chair. "I shouldn't have intruded at such a time." The quick dark eyes under the bony hollows of the brows were fixed on Doctor Lidgett—as if he were a lighthouse looked at from a stormy sea. The face was pallid; the fingers twitched restlessly; there was an air of vigilant intelligence on the features—as if the spirit of which

they were the mask had for some time been afraid of being frightened, and intent on realising it when real cause for fear came.

Dr. Lidgett sat with his back to the window, his chair turned a little away from the table, his right leg crossed over his left, showing a neat, well-cut boot. He remained perfectly still, his eyes downcast, his well-kept hands resting a little heavily on the arms of his chair. His attitude suggested indeed that to listen like this to what this untimely stranger was saying, and as heedfully and as sympathetically as possible, was, if anything, preferable, perhaps, to listening to nothing, to being alone.

"Not at all," he murmured reassuringly, glancing up at his visitor, "please be quite comfortable about that, and go on with what you were telling me. As I say, this is not my usual consulting hour; and as a matter of fact my partner, Dr. Herbert Scott, is attending to my patients for the next few days. You would find him this evening at Drayton House—No. 110—a little further down the hill. But don't let that concern you now. You were complaining of physical lassitude, general *malaise?*"

His voice was low and unanimated, but he pronounced his words with precision, his rather full red lips moving beneath his square-cut beard. The eyes of the two of them met for an instant, and the doctor looked away.

"It's exceedingly kind of you," his visitor demurred. "And—well, that is really my trouble. But, as I was saying, it's not exactly physical. Indeed," he added, as if in disappointment that there should be so little to tell, "there appears to be precious little actually wrong with me; nothing much more, I mean, than what is usual in these days and at my age, I suppose. It is merely this

detestable listlessness of mind; this loss of *mental* appetite. And I had a wonderful digestion once!" He smiled at this wintry ghost of a joke. "The fact is I can't regain my grip on things. It is as though whatever I do or think or say—or feel for that matter—serves no purpose, is no manner of use—to myself, I mean. And yet, my friends talk to me much as usual. Nobody seems to have noticed anything wrong. They haven't said so. But then we don't, do we? I wonder at times, doctor, if it is not because we daren't. There must be many of us, surely, in much the same *galère?*

"I am, as I say, a writer, an author by profession. I scribble a good deal for the magazines, fiction chiefly." The dark eyebrows raised themselves above the intently dark and smallish eyes. "As a matter of fact my name is Pritchard," he explained. "You may just possibly have come across it somewhere."

"I know the name," said Dr. Lidgett discreetly, "but I could not perhaps definitely connect it with anything I have actually read. But then I have little time for reading."

"No, no, no, of course not," his visitor hastened to reassure him. "I didn't mean that; it was only that nowadays we can hardly help to some extent taking in one another's washing, so to speak. On the other hand of course, fiction is read almost solely by women—a sort of stimulant, perhaps. I mentioned it merely because, I suppose, one's occupation counts. Not that I claim, thank heaven, to be a victim of the artistic temperament; as a matter of fact I'm not up to that standard. Far from it." He smiled again, looking the while more haggard and lifeless than ever.

"But that's how I stand. What I mean is this—that, so far as I know, lungs, heart, liver, and all that are sound enough—as sound at least as one would expect at my age. I was examined not so very long ago either. It's rather my mind, my nerves, you know. Not that there is anything definitely, organically wrong with my mind either, I hope. At least I *hope* not." He smiled —a smile almost lustrous in its intensity. "Not at least in the usual meaning of the word."

Dr. Lidgett gazed steadily at this naïve yet receptive and highly animated face. He too smiled, but as if at such moments it was customary to do so. "It is exceedingly unlikely," he agreed, "that you would have come to me if that had been the case. Not at all. Were you recommended to see me—personally?"

"No, oh no. I haven't even that excuse. I was passing; I was walking along the street, not going anywhere in particular of course; and I caught sight of the plate and the lamp. One is foolish perhaps to obey these vague impulses. It isn't quite fair. But . . . Somehow it seemed, *there's* your chance. I read the names—as I say—and my only fear was that this might be Dr. Scott's. I wanted to see *you,* Dr. Lidgett: I don't know why. But there, I am only worsening my case," he stirred in his chair, groped for his hat, "I see I *am* detaining you. Let me come again another time."

If Dr. Lidgett felt any impatience with so hesitant a visitor, his sober unmoving countenance showed not a trace of it. "Please go on: I am anxious to hear," he said, though his words sounded as if they were more unwilling than usual to come at the moment's call. "Tell me precisely what these mental or nervous symptoms are.

Is your memory fairly good for example—names, dates, words and so on? Do you find it difficult to fix your attention—to concentrate? Have you any worry? Is there any particular thing continually on your mind? Are your thoughts interrupted, I mean, as if without cause?"

"I don't hear voices, or anything of that kind," said his visitor. "No more, I mean, than one *should* in doing my particular kind of work. My memory is remarkably good—for what I need. And I can concentrate on what I really want to do. What more do I ask?"

The blank face with which he put this question resembled Grimaldi's at his most melancholy; it was at the same time so empty, so forlorn and so ineffectual. "Literally nothing, doctor, except to say that there is no purpose in what I do. It is lifeless, inert; the bottom's knocked out of it. No use at all; except, of course, for what it brings in—the merely practical side of it."

"Have you—any family?" inquired the doctor. Indeed he almost blurted the question in his quiet fashion, as if it were one not entirely to his liking, too intrusive and personal.

"None whatever," was the reply. Mr. Pritchard in fact looked slightly astonished at being asked anything so commonplace, as if he had been unexpectedly presented with an aspect of life which he had never paused to consider. "I live with my mother," he said. "She is an old lady now. Hale still, but a little deaf, and apt to repeat herself. We spend a great deal of time together. But lately she has not been so well as I could wish. Have you ever repeated that phrase—'failing health'—over to yourself? Tennyson, you know, used to say under his

breath *'Alfred, Alfred, Alfred'* until he became like a shell with the wind in it—empty. But I say instead, 'In failing health—in failing health—in failing health'—the meaning intensifies, doctor, the longer you brood on it. But that of course is not what you were asking. Besides, I doubt if any kind of responsibility—wife and children and so on—that kind of thing—would make much difference. I haven't noticed it in other men. It might even complicate matters, mightn't it?" But Dr. Lidgett, on his side, appeared not to have considered this problem; and his visitor pressed on.

"To tell you the honest truth," he said, "I have come to the end of things. For me, the spirit, the meaning—whatever you like to call it—has vanished, gone clean out of the world, out of what we call reality. At least for me. It's nothing but a husk; and a dried-up husk at that. It may sound pompous and affected, but, try as I may, I can no longer see any purpose in it all, even if I ever did. You may retort," he interrupted himself eagerly —"you may retort: 'But, then, who does?' But then, you see, there is all the difference between not seeing a purpose in life because you haven't looked for one; and being sure there is no purpose when you have.

"Besides, what right have we to assume there *is* a purpose? What justification? The palaver! I remember not many months ago—I had been in bed for a few days with a chill—I woke up one afternoon and found my eyes fixed on the window—autumn trees, a quiet blue sky, a few late swallows, twilight coming: and at that moment as if in divination I *knew* there was no purpose. I wanted nothing; so there was nothing to want. . . .

A tale told by an idiot—signifying nothing. What if Shakespeare himself *meant* that?"

Dr. Lidgett glanced covertly away from his visitor. Nobody could have gathered from his quiet solemn eyes if he considered even Shakespearean convictions of final validity, or even if he needed any evidence in the matter. Their expression was absent and yet mournful, as if they were fixed on the ghost or spectre of some happy memory never to be retrieved, never to bloom again.

"It's difficult to explain these things," his visitor was chattering on, almost vivaciously. "But I wrote a bit of a story once, with something of that idea at the back of it—the changing points of view, I mean. It was about a man who buys a pair of spectacles—goggles—greenish glass, copper handles—at a shop tucked away under a row of lime-trees in a little cathedral town. Three steps down; very still and musty-fusty; owl in a glass case; antiques, all sorts; and a funny old shop-keeper with a goatee beard. That kind of thing. He asks the peering old creature if he has any glasses to shield his eyes from the glare outside. The thing's symbolic, of course. And when the customer goes out of the shop and puts them on, everything in the world is changed." Up went Mr. Pritchard's black eyebrows once more as if in the wildest astonishment at such an original idea: though apparently he was only waiting for a word of encouragement.

"Changed?" Dr. Lidgett enquired. "For the worse?"

"Oh no, the better! The other, surely, would be rather too much of a problem! I couldn't tackle that."

"I fancied," the doctor patiently replied, "you meant that the man who buys the spectacles was—well . . ."

"No, no, quite the reverse," the visitor ejaculated eagerly. "He puts them on in the street. And presto! his whole world is transmogrified. Grand transformation scene: everything around him becomes instantly irradiated with beauty and life and meaning—all that; dancing with happiness and light. Even the shop is an Ali Baba's cavern: and the trees outside spread their boughs over him like green tents of enchantment, sighing with mystery and delight. The people in the street—creatures from another planet: Traherne, of course: all *colours* and beautiful forms intensified. They walk as if they had wings—head, shoulder, thigh, like the angels in Isaiah: Each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly:—just as if the fellow had been taking haschisch or something. He sees a woman with a basket—going shopping: she is fair as Israfel, wondrous as manna, shining—Botticelli. The buildings are marvellously transmuted, too. Even little common things changed: the dust, the cobwebs, the refuse, the manure in the streets, a sandy cat on a window-sill, the sparrows, a thrush in a cage, singing—'in the silence of morning the song of the bird.'

"And he goes into the cathedral, in which only the day before he had yawned his way from tomb to tomb, to find it a shrine drenched with loveliness; as if some incomparable artist had spent centuries in cutting the stones, and as if the stones themselves had been quarried from some celestial quarry. There is a faint exquisite blue in the air. He can even hear, like a network of faintly shimmering strings, all the music, the Marbecke and Palestrina, the Bach and the Beethoven and the Pur-

cell and so on, that had floated up and into silence and rest into the fretted roof century after century. I overdid it a little perhaps. You can't help yourself. But that's how it ran. The spectacles, too, I agree, were a bit mechanical; but then for my part I could never quite stomach the physic trick in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. But that's how it came; and the story was published all right. In fact I had one or two letters about it. People are very odd."

Dr. Lidgett had watched his patient steadily through this monologue—his alert gestures, his mobile features, his shining eyes. At this pause he recrossed his legs, closed his eyes very gently—much as a lion blinks at sight of a two-legged visitor looking at him through the bars of his cage.

"It's a story which I should think children particularly would delight in," he remarked courteously, but with his usual reserve. "I should like to have read it. How did it end?"

He made the question sound as free from mere civility as possible, but could not restrain the faint sigh which these last few days had been the completion of every other breath he breathed.

"Oh the end?" echoed Mr. Pritchard a little dejectedly. "That is always the difficulty. He begins to preach at the street corner and is shut up for a lunatic and they take his spectacles away and—and so on. It was only a tale. But you see my meaning. The curious thing is that *that* is what we all say about another world. We are haunted by this hope, even this divination of another state or condition of being that is beyond our mortal senses to realise. A place or condition where—well, after

death, of course. And yet, I feel, if we are not capable of it here and now, how is the transition to be made? Where shall we find the spectacles? There are some people, of course, who seem never to have needed them —they *are* peace and happiness. But . . ."

He gazed at the doctor as if he were really and truly in need of enlightenment, and as if even possibly it might be included in the fee. "Well, for most of us—we don't come across wonder-working opticians under every lime-tree in every cathedral town. And supposing, as you suggested, the magic power of the spectacles had been reversed. What scene then would have met our friend's eyes!

"All I mean is, don't we all have to put up with what we ourselves, each one of us, can get? And the tendency—— I remember another tale I read once, by a French writer—at least the name was French. A translation, I think. It was about a philosophical crank whose lifelong hobby had been to transmute knowledge, just as the old philosophers tried to transmute metals. Or rather to focus knowledge so that it became an intrinsic part of himself—as of course all true knowledge is to some extent; a genuine 'common sense' to the *n*'th degree; a power of vision; almost, as one might say, another dimension. He sees things first through one aspect of knowledge and then through another in rapid succession, and realise, through a fleeting eternity of change reality's everlasting nothingness or somethingness, whichever way you like to put it." Mr. Pritchard smiled. "In the end, he decided that he would have been a wiser and happier man if he had remained content with his own small natural instincts. He gave the game up—though that perhaps hardly sounds

French. I have muddled the story, but that was the gist."

The doctor nodded, as if in encouragement; but even an unobservant visitor could hardly have helped noticing that his attention and interest had begun to wane, had begun to resume their own natural channel. He had sunk a little lower into his chair, and a faint cloud of ennui or abstraction had settled on his features.

Mr. Pritchard sighed. "I don't mean, doctor, that that is in any sense my experience. Far from it. It's beyond me!" The animation died out of the pallid face. The wide forehead resumed its customary frown. The little black eyes fixed themselves on the pattern of the surgery carpet. "All *my* knowledge only adds to the burden, the realisation how helpless I am to contend against this settled conviction of my general uselessness and ineffectiveness. I realise, too, that it is only *my* knowledge, and that that being so, how am I to know that it has any true relation to—any bearing whatsoever —on the facts, on the reality? Please don't suppose that I am pretending to be an expert in anything. I have scarcely more than dabbled in subjects outside my own particular bent. But speaking of the little I have learned and read, works of science and so on, and taking it for granted that even the novice, the mere man in the street, is free to come to his own conclusions, however partial and inadequate they are bound to be, it seems to me that all that too is nothing more than a general kind of human make-believe. It is merely what *they*—the experts—think, not regarding what really matters to the very self within but only outside material things.

"They work away—self-denyingly and modestly, too,

for the most part—with their little scales and their instruments, their little scalpels and acids and batteries and retorts and all that paraphernalia. But whatever the result, however amusing and serviceable and ingenious, we all *know* that such evidence is only the secretion or excretion of their own senses. Senses that can tell us only what they are capable of being sensible *of*.

"And look at it! What—I ask you—is the instant's good of this enormous machine we call life—this treadmill, the moment you question whether there is any value or truth or purpose or what-not in what it grinds? Look at their chemistry—the beautiful water-tight jargon of it all. Look at their astronomy: their red star this and their green star that, and the waste of space and the curve to it, and their spectral analyses and their orbits, and their rules of thumb and their mileage—their mileage! As if, doctor, my being two or three yards from you now is a fact of the slightest spiritual importance! In itself, I mean."

The doctor quietly eyeing his visitor, nodded once more. But even yet—though the faintest, dying spark of animation, even of remote amusement, had kindled in his quiet blue eye, it was hardly as though he took more than a merely courteous and friendly interest in what, with so much zest and conviction, his patient was *saying*. But that patient, as alert as any practised prima-donna or conjurer in "sensing" the responsiveness of an audience, had noticed this tiny ray of encouragement, and at once pressed forward.

"I went out last night: I went out into my garden. It's little more than a square green patch of grass, with a few old trees, an acacia and so on, but pleasant

and secluded, and not much overlooked. We make a point of that, oddly enough: not to be overlooked! As if—— It has a nice old wall, too—a fragment of flotsam left by the country when it receded from the filthy flood of London. And I looked up into what they call the starry void of space; splinters of light: Aldebaran, the rainy Hyades, the clusters, the nebulæ—of the Pleiads, Orion and the rest—annular, elliptic, spiral; you know the delightful jargon. And then the Milky Way—the Milky Way! And Venus there in the west, the goddess of Roman love. And now and then, a gentle, soundless, silver curve of dying light—some meteor candling its way into oblivion. I agree you might call it solemn, beautiful, entrancing; significant, even, if you happened to be a young couple just fallen in love. But—for you and me, doctor! I looked, and my imagination simply refused to respond. The spectacle was there, punctual, brilliant, according to specification—but honestly this particular programme-seller was unable to applaud. It was like strumming on a dumb piano—a fake piano. It meant no more to me than a piece of paper over which some idiot in a moment of ill-temper has flicked a fountain-pen. Reverse the colour-scheme: make the sky silvery-white and the stars black dots. What interpretation should we put upon it then? Something sombre and profound and meaningful, not a doubt of it: and with as much and as little justification. The constellations: a child's scrawls! Doggerel!

"The *Goat* to Vesta we allot;
Juno prefers the *Water-pot;*
And Neptune has his *Fishes* got.

"Oh yes, amusing, romantic enough, if you're that way inclined. And I'm saying nothing against it for those who still happily are tinder to every scientific spark. But"—he shifted wearily in his luxurious chair—"well, I went back into the house. As usual my old mother was sitting by the fire, stooped up together in her easy chair in her silk shawl—one of those ugly old Victorian horse-hair chairs, made for endurance. And I thought suddenly what a long time it had taken to make her old like that. I thought of what she had gone through—I'm not her only child—to come out *there,* like that. I thought I might perhaps have to survive her and grow old too—and only strangers to look after me. She was knitting. I don't know what she was knitting; but her hands are crooked now, and getting clumsy with her needles.

"I bawled, 'It's a fine starry night, mother.'

"She said, 'Eh, Charles?'

"I repeated the observation. She said she was glad it was fine. She is an old lady now. Very rarely goes out, you know; so weather hardly matters to her sitting cooped up indoors by the hearth. And upon my word, doctor, as I looked at her—my own mother—I seemed to see Death himself hooped together there in that chair huddling close down to the fire It was as if the old villain had taken to the device to pass away the time in his old age!—knitting together a winding-sheet for the whole human race; for this complete ridiculous universe. Yet even as I thought that, it seemed I should be suffocated with remorse—the odiousness of such a feeling about *her!* But no. She wasn't to blame. *We* understand one another: mother and son. There's no need of

any sense of proportion in that. One's heart almost breaks at the thought of its own impotence to express, and to comfort, and to tell. . . . Those awful souls one sees in the streets! Awful. Good Lord, doctor, this whole stellar universe of ours may be no more than the bubbles in a bottle of champagne—or soda-water! And we humans the restless maggots in a rotting excretion of the sun. And yet—we go on breeding!"

The doctor drew his hand gently down over his beard. He coughed softly, glancing sidelong at his eloquent patient. "Am I to understand," he said, "that you actually saw a physical change in your mother—I mean, that it amounted to anything in the nature of an hallucination?"

"That's just it," said his visitor suddenly angling himself up in his chair as if some one had pulled the appropriate wire; "that's just it. I *did* so see it: but only, of course, with my inward eye. It was so because I saw it so: but I'm not pressing it as scientific evidence. No, doctor, I can manage the hallucinations all right, whenever I want to; and without trespassing too far over the edge. In fact I should of course be a pretty poor scribbler of fiction—worse even than I am—if I couldn't."

"But they don't persist?" persisted the doctor.

Once more Mr. Pritchard's features seemed to collect themselves together into a point of intense vacuity; and Dr. Lidgett looked away again. Beyond the surgery window was a patch of red-brick wall on which a young fruit-tree had been espaliered. It was in scanty leaf now, but though its flowers came punctually to the season, its fruit never ripened, for only the beams of a north-west sun ever peeped into this corner of the doctor's garden. His glance having wandered away from the occupant of

his chair rested heavily on its vivid green. This valiant little plum-tree was an old friend of his. He had watched its miracle of revivification recur year after year: had noticed it while he had sat interviewing his patients one after the other, doing his best for them in his own solemn fashion before eagerly returning to that new life of his upstairs. And realising that it was never likely to bear, he would go out in the evening and pluck a sprig or two of its blossom to bring in for a surprise. It showed greener than ever this particular spring, as if it had taken on an unprecedented verdure, had made the friendliest of efforts, for a particular occasion. And one could hardly blame it if the occasion had suddenly perished, or refused to keep its tryst.

His visitor, having shaken himself free of a momentary absent-mindedness, had followed the direction of the doctor's eyes, and himself gazed a moment at the leafing plum.

"It's a curious thing," he said, "but my mind—what they call the subconscious, I suppose—seems for some little time past to have been exploring in the very direction of the state into which I have been gradually reduced. One might almost suppose, I mean, that things and events of the outside world are only mere properties in the inward scene—farce or melodrama—in which one is the only *unquestionably* living actor. Not that I am by profession a solipsist! That little tree, there, reminds me, for example, of yet another piece of fiction I managed to write a few months ago. I know I am boring you with all this stuff, Dr. Lidgett; but it's only because it seems to me to be symptomatic so to speak; and I sup-

pose even the smallest particular may be of service in arriving at a diagnosis."

The doctor turned back his head again, shifted his elbows on the arms of the chair, leaned his chin on his fingers, and once more out of his calm settled eyes patiently surveyed his visitor. "Certainly," he said. "We usually, you know, have to extract these things for ourselves. It is a help to have them volunteered. What is this other story you were referring to?"

"Why"—once more Mr. Pritchard's pallid face lit up with inward animation and the gesticulations of his small long-fingered hands helped him out—"why, in this story, it is Nature herself that dries up. Very gradually, of course. At first, indeed, almost imperceptibly. For a succession of autumns the harvests are slightly but cumulatively less abundant; now in this country, now in that. But steadily and incessantly the general average begins to dwindle all over the world. Then, here and there the deficit becomes acute. At first it is only the important—humanly important things, I mean—cereals, sugar, hops, vines, tea, coffee, and so on, that are noticeably deficient—the irony being that less vital though important things flourish. Rubber, cotton, hemp, for example, continue steady. And new gold and diamond mines are actually discovered. There is a positive plethora of coal and petroleum. Transportation from one scene of growing desolation to another therefore remains easy.

"And then, doctor, the creeping shadow! First the cautious experts, the statisticians, the exchanges, the markets, and then on and on in ever widening circles

of misgiving and panic. And ever more widely the rumour spreads. The merest patch of countryside re-reveals the secret at last—one glance at the straggling thinning fields, the wilting hedges, the famished cattle, the naked soil, gaping and grinning through the green—growing bald! And so the pinch grows steadily sharper until the world at large—at least the civilised part of it—begins to realise what it is really in for. There is an orgy of crises: changes of Government: International Conferences: ever more and more impotent and ineffectual. And then at last the newspapers fall on the scare like bluebottles on carrion.

"And the following spring the full realisation comes. Things of age-long standing—the forests, the trees, the prairies and savannas—falter, pine, dwindle, fade, perish. And Man realises his final destiny. Even his beloved and trusty law of averages has gone to the deuce, and his just and equable old grandmother Nature is obviously playing the jilt. I can tell you this, doctor, the upshot of that little situation was a good deal worse than the European war. Society, of course, simply falls to pieces. Starvation; mobs; rioting; religious frenzies; fanatics; communities of suicide. You can imagine a starving Europe—we have caught glimpses of a starving Asia. And in trouble like that the taking of sides is of comparatively little account. Even an imaginary situation such as that refreshes such desiccated old problems as, What do we human beings really believe in? and, Exactly how much do we value posterity? For my part—provided that nature kept things going just for æsthetic reasons, I cannot honestly see that it would be altogether a calamity if humanity did give up the ghost, or at any

rate, if a very large proportion of our superabundant populations did. *I* am ready."

The doctor spoke mufflédly—through his fingers. "The birth-rate *is,* I believe, actually falling in most European countries. And naturally there are many economists and eugenists who rejoice at it. You have a vivid fancy, Mr. Pritchard, if I may venture to say so. But we may hope things won't reach such an extreme as that."

His visitor smiled; candidly, almost eagerly. "Perhaps not; and of course you are right about the birth-rate. But the death-rate's going down too—and so the tide is kept in genial flood. Isn't that so?"

But Dr. Lidgett seemed to have as suddenly lost interest in the question as he had found it. He shut his mouth, unclenched his fingers, looked away. And once more the dark quick face opposite him also lost life and expression. Mr. Pritchard indeed was stifling the rudiments of a yawn.

"Well, that was the story. A mere shocker, of course. It sold well, too. But I agree Nature has as yet ignored my hint." He looked about him, as if in search of something lost long ago, as if searching had become little more than an automatic reaction. He appeared to be a little uneasy too, as if his conscience were at last chiding him for taking an advantage so extreme of a fellow-professional who merely happened to be at a loose end, and, kindly and tolerant enough to listen to him.

"But quite seriously, doctor," he began again apologetically, "why *are* some of us singled out to realise the appalling trap we are all in? How many of us, do you suppose, do realise it: have the courage or the fatuity to face the question? And, as for the rest, what is the

impulse, the impetus that keeps them going? Deceives them, if you like, but still keeps them going? Are we really to acknowledge that it is a purely physical thing? This fountain of life that keeps green our philosophical fallacies, keeps green our delight in things, our interest in our fellow-creatures, our faith in Hope, or, at any rate, in a decent courage, even though there is not the slightest logical justification for it—is it really and indeed nothing but a sort of physical well-being? If it's merely that, then I suppose treatment might put it right, Dr. Lidgett? Treatment, at any rate, could prevent my concerning myself with it any longer. Say a fraction of a grain of prussic acid. But if it's mental, of the soul, well, my God, I shall keep a very silent tongue in my head when talking to anybody else than a man of your profession! On the other hand, if it *is* mental, why, somehow I feel I ought to try to fight it out. What do you suggest?"

Dr. Lidgett having so long and so patiently (and so unenterprisingly) waited for this opportunity, asked his visitor a few sedate, common-place questions concerning his actual health: his appetite, the hours he kept, how much he smoked, how badly he slept. But then, he had nothing else to do this long spring afternoon, nothing whatever except to look through a few bundles of discarded letters, to write a cheque or two, one in payment of a nominal fee to a specialist on cancer, another for services rendered by yet another kind of specialist—and then to leave his vacant, his incredibly vacant house, and to go away for a few days. He had indeed already once or twice during his visitor's jerky conversation seen himself pacing the deserted but "bracing" esplanade of a small southern watering-place. This untimely creature

would not detain him much longer. Besides, he was himself by nature and habit cautious and thorough. He submitted his patient to a close and exhaustive examination; heart, lungs, stomach, knee jerk and the rest. Then he once more resumed his seat and looked out of the window.

Having no looking-glass handy, Mr. Pritchard was now apparently taking particular care over the adjustment of his collar and tie, though the sidelong twist of his head at the moment suggested that of a bird past all care on a poulterer's hook. But his eyes meanwhile were busily exploring the neat efficient furnishings of Dr. Lidgett's consulting-room. From object to object they darted, bright as fireflies on a summer's evening. They had become by long practice the willing servants of his craving for "local colour." It was a habit that would no doubt persist even when only a few minutes remained to him of his earthly existence. Indeed, though he must be even in an unusual degree the conscious centre of his own small universe, he was profoundly interested in his fellow-creatures—their absurd little ways and habits and eccentricities. Nothing human shocked or failed to concern him, except possibly most of his fellow-authors' fiction.

On the other hand, though his eyes and senses were at this moment as active as ever, his thoughts were otherwise engaged. Since it could lead to nothing, he was upbraiding himself again for giving all this trouble to the quiet sedate figure seated in the chair over there. He looked a good sort, if ever there was one—probably intensely kind to his poorer patients, even his panel patients, though, as probably, quite unable to appreciate what he himself had been saying, even if he had con-

sidered it worthy of attention. A general practitioner must often have to make allowances for patients that appear to them to be little better than freaks; women especially—with nerves rather than minds to pester them.

He had taken a liking to Dr. Lidgett; he liked that placid, cautious manner—the reserve of the man. What kind of inward life did *he* lead, he wondered. What kind of home life? "Have you—er—any family?"—the doctor's question recurred to him so amusingly that it brought the ghost of a smile into his mind. It must be an odd thing to spend one's days tinkering about with deranged human machines—deranged simply because the silly fool of an engineer has neglected or overworked them. On the other hand, the mere human norm must be as uninteresting as it is probably unprofitable. What "family doctors" wanted were patients with plenty of money and small recurrent ailments. For his own particular purpose he himself preferred the human machine that was not running as smoothly as one of those ghastly electric dynamos with the huge buzzing fly-wheel. So much fuel; so much energy: so much lubricating oil; so much pressure to the square inch. Was it even possible to be fully and vividly conscious and physically sound and normal at the same time?

Apart too from the thoughts in Mr. Pritchard's mind, dizzying themselves like wasps fluttering round a honey-pot, there lay only half-concealed beneath them the steady horrible conviction that nothing now was of the slightest account; that the spirit within him, past all hope of ease and happiness and reassurance, resembled a wretched fiend howling in the midst of a black cloud—darkness and tempest. Once more leaning his head a little side-

long he glanced at his reflection in the glass of a picture, and buttoned up the last button of his waistcoat.

"I am afraid, doctor," he murmured, "I must have been the worst possible type of patient. And what is as bad, I ought not to have forced myself on you at this particular time—outside your consulting hours, I mean, which I confess to having seen on the doorplate. I gather too that just now you are actually taking a holiday. It was infamous. I hope you will forgive me!"

There was something curiously winning and amiable in the looks of the little man as the doctor glanced up at him and smiled, assuring him that there was no need whatever for such apologies. Indeed Dr. Lidgett's one inward and unspoken regret was his incapacity to be of any real service to his patient. Only in the most rudimentary fashion could he minister to a mind diseased—even his own. *That* he knew. He knew too, only too well, that he could but potter around the problem which had been presented to him, and that even any practical advice he might give—a few little commonsensical directions regarding work, exercise, food, sleep and so on—would probably be ignored and forgotten as soon as his visitor was out of the house.

Was not Humanity itself for that matter habitually ignoring counsel and directions from mind and heart that were none the less sound for being instinctive and commonplace? The pity was that when so little was really wrong—for, so far as the mere circumstances of his visitor were concerned, there appeared to be absurdly little justification for complaint—there was no obvious handle to take hold of. These maladies of the spirit—what cure for *them?* Probably his best advice would be:

Try the streets, my friend, for a week or two, without a halfpenny in your pocket and with your jacket for shirt. Or, Give away all you've got and get a dustman's, or stoker's, or fish-porter's job; and then come back to me in a month's time. Or, Take up some beastly philanthropic work—visiting cancer patients or syphilitic children. No doubt what Mr. Pritchard was really in need of was a moral shock: something to "larn him" to be a pessimist and a hypochondriac.

Nothing of all this showed on Dr. Lidgett's tranquil and sober face, however. He went about what he was at with an almost feminine neatness and circumspection. And though his hand trembled a little as he held out the prescription he had written down, he talked quietly on awhile, specifying with precision the little things that might be of benefit, and assuring his visitor that the worst thing in the world was to look too closely at things. Except, of course, at things of nature, which after all (and in spite of his little extravaganza) had up to the present proved astonishingly faithful, and bore even the keenest scrutiny with triumphant ease. Provided you accepted its mute decrees and vetoes, with as much resolution as you were capable of.

He did not utter this last thought aloud, however. It had occurred to him merely because his eye had once more strayed to the young green leafing plum-tree crucified upon his garden wall. But the rest of his professional advice had not fallen on deaf ears, apparently. With a smiling reference to his "pestilent" memory, his visitor had actually gone so far as to scribble down a few memoranda in his pocket-book while the doctor was speaking.

But when the pleasant suppressed voice had ceased, the merest glance at those restless eyes, as Mr. Pritchard pushed back the tiny pencil into its place, and re-pocketed his pocket-book, would have perceived that once more the spirit within was circling like a coal-black swift over a gloomy and deserted waste of stones and brawling water—would have perceived, too, that the superficial mind of the creature was as active as ever over its own chosen trifles. He looked at the doctor, opened his mouth, hesitated: and even began again.

"The curious thing is," he said, "and oddly enough it has only just occurred to me—I once began a story with a situation in it very much like ours now."

The doctor raised his head and lifted his eyebrows a little. It had at last occurred to his generous and unsuspicious mind that this scarecrow of a fellow was merely amusing himself at his expense, that he was making a butt of him. But at one glimpse again of that candid, darkly-hollowed face, the tiny flame of righteous indignation that had sprung up within him instantly faded out.

"How that?" he said kindly.

"Why, it was like this. The author—who was what is called for some God-forsaken reason a realist, which so far as I can make out merely means that he restricts his material (just like most of our men of science) to what ordinary human beings in their ordinary human moments would agree are 'the facts of the case'—this author goes to a doctor. Neither of them was like ourselves. My author was a raw-boned, lanky fellow, with a shock of reddish hair; and the doctor was a kind of specialist, or rather consultant; a dark saturnine man with bristling

black eyebrows—pallid. The author—mainly in search of copy, of course—concocted some cock-and-bull story that his wife had suicidal tendencies. And what did the specialist advise?"

"And what *did* he advise?" enquired Dr. Lidgett, but not as if with any particular curiosity.

"Well, you see, the doctor himself was at his last gasp, so to speak—had been speculating, and had lost all his money. And in addition, or in subtraction, whichever way one likes to put it, his own wife had run away from him. He asked his visitor a few questions, and the wretch, having a pretty quick invention and abundant *sangfroid,* supplied him with vivid and convincing details of his wife's symptoms: how she had been dragged back angry and weeping from the very jaws of the grave."

"And how did it end?"

The question was hardly audible even in the quietness of this habitually quiet room. The sound of the words indeed hardly interrupted the capricious little air which the restless water was tapping into its basin behind the screen. Mr. Pritchard had leaned forward in his chair as if he were momentarily uncertain if the doctor had spoken at all.

"Oh," he replied at last, "it never ended at all. You see, when I was half way through, I came across a story by Anton Tchekhov—the Russian writer you know—which has a somewhat similar theme. Near enough to mine, at any rate, to ensure that the reviewers would have accused me of plagiarising if I had published it. But that is one of the amusing things about this deplorable life of ours—we are all incorrigible plagiarists, or, at best, parasites. We live on other people's well-being

and happiness, our friends and relations. Even on their characters! Ask a father what he thinks of life when his son has gone to the bad, or—or anything of that kind. We can't help ourselves. Even to die and be free of it all is a woeful slap in the face to one's nearest and dearest. The curious detail in my story," he pushed on almost gaily, "curious, I mean, as things go—was that there was actually a photograph in a silver frame on the doctor's table very much like that one *there*. But in this case my enterprising young Mr. McKay could actually see it—the photograph of a young woman—a lovely, seductive, dangerous-looking creature. It was a photograph, in fact, of the doctor's wife who had run away. And—as my ginger-haired friend compared the victim and the victimised—he could hardly find it in his head to blame the gay seducer. As a matter of fact I hated the story."

Dr. Lidgett stirred heavily in his chair, and for the last time fixed intent eyes on his visitor's face. "That was indeed a coincidence," he said. "For the portrait here on my table is also a photograph of my wife."

He was now quite still and composed again, gazing fixedly but tranquilly at his visitor yet as if only by keeping him well in focus he would be able to maintain his own professional calm and aloofness. Besides, in spite of the sharpest disinclination, he wished intensely to make the fleeting relation between them friendly and helpful to the end. "However, it's a coincidence," he added, "that goes no further. I must some day read the story you mention—by the Russian writer. What did you say the name was?"

"Tchekhov—he was himself a doctor, you know, and

a devilish good one too, simply unwearying in doing good, besides being the finest writer of short stories, in my humble opinion, of any I know."

With these words Mr. Pritchard rose hastily out of his chair; and once more that awful vacancy spread up into his face. To look at that face now, it might be merely a cruel caricature of himself—dark, discolored null, without interest, hope or desire. He gulped—like a child after a long fit of crying—and held out his hand.

"Well doctor," he said, "you have been enormously kind to me; far, far kinder than I deserve. But you can have no notion what a help it has been just to—to have talked like this. Quite candidly, I doubt if any remedies can now be of much service; but I will do my best to follow your advice. Anyhow, I am not like that poor wretch's wife in my story: I shan't go to any extreme! In the first place I doubt if I have the courage to—to run away. And in the second, my own conviction is that there are so many people in this world in much the same state of mind as I am, that if any large proportion of us decided—well, to try elsewhere, the statistics would be positively alarming. That alone would solve the Malthusian problem.

"I suppose—to give it a fine-sounding phrase—it is the disease of our modern civilisation: nothing definitely, tragically wrong, but just the general condition of things. Not that I am so foolish as to make any claim to being a thinker; I hardly even deserve the name of a feeler. I look on, chiefly. But it is this fate of being a human being at all, with this appalling power of watching ourselves suffer, that becomes at last almost intolerable. The power, too," he smiled, "of being actually able to

describe our symptoms. And at considerable length, doctor. But there, I have had one supreme advantage this afternoon; for *you* have listened to me, whereas we humans in general in these days seem in the long run to have no one whatsoever to confide in. No one, I mean, in heaven or earth whom we really seem to trust any longer."

He paused, softly drawing his hand round the brim of his hat; then once more smiled—that curiously childish ingratiating smile. "Even at that," he added, "I feel you would be right in labelling me something of a fraud; for whatever happens—rest or no rest—I shall probably go on with my work all right. It's an odd thing, but, do you know, nothing seems to have the slightest effect upon that. I dare say that is your experience, too. My old mother sometimes tells our friends, 'Charles thoroughly enjoys his work, you know. . . . Charles thoroughly enjoys his writing.' And Charles can't deny it. That alone should be almost enough to convince one that this is a mechanistic universe. Once wound up, and with enough ink and paper in the machine, one just goes on and on, like—well, even better than clockwork!"

Dr. Lidgett took the hand stretched out to him and held it for the briefest moment clasped warmly in his own. His lips moved a little, as if in an attempt to express the inexpressible; or even to utter a syllable or two of kindness concerning Mr. Pritchard's old mother. But he made no further remark. He led the way to the door, then followed his visitor across the hall. A Sheraton barometer stood opposite the hat-stand. Something had gone wrong with its works. Its needle stood at "Set Fair," whereas but one casual glance at the exquisite mack-

erel sky above the trees under the open porch was proof enough of the caprices of an English spring. Dr. Lidgett stood holding the handle of the front door; and, looking out, watched his visitor until he had reached the gate.

For some reason, most of his patients, he had noticed, were punctilious in the matter of closing the gate after them, when they left his house. They did it firmly, scrupulously, finally, and without noise. This patient—Mr. Pritchard—went even further. He once more turned, showing under his hard felt hat that dark white face—rather like a telescopic rendering of the landscapes of the moon. Then he raised that hat, and smiled. Dr. Lidgett in response lifted his hand; and his visitor vanished behind the privet hedge.

These, of course, were but gestures of common courtesy. And yet, in the quiet damp air, in that darkening spring twilight, they seemed to be pregnant signals rushing to meet and to cross and to combine—like secret messages in the sphere of the telepathic.

Having bidden his visitor this almost solemn adieu, Dr. Lidgett had then as gently and firmly shut his front door, and turned back into his surgery. He at once sat down at his desk and scribbled into his day-book a neat and methodical account of the interview that had just come to an end. He then shut the book, leaned back in his chair, folded his well-kept competent hands; and his empty eyes, as if of their own volition, strayed towards the photograph on his table.

That too was the photograph of a young and lovely face, but not a "dangerous" one. And its owner had certainly not "run away." She had merely "gone" away, and for good, and very unwillingly.

The Nap

HE autumnal afternoon was creeping steadily on towards night; the sun after the morning's rain was now—from behind thinning clouds—glinting down on the chimney-pots and slate roofs of Mr. Thripp's suburb. And the day being a Saturday, across Europe, across England, an immense multitudinous stirring of humanity was in progress. It had begun in remote Australia and would presently sweep across the Atlantic into vast America, resembling the rustling of an ant-heap in a pine wood in sunny June. The Christian world, that is, was preparing for its weekly half-holiday; and Mr. Thripp was taking his share.

As if time were of unusual importance to him, two clocks stood on his kitchen mantelpiece: one, gay as a peepshow in the middle, in a stained wood case with red and blue flowers on the glass front; the other an "alarum" —which though it was made of tin had a voice and an appearance little short of the brazen. Above them, as if entirely oblivious to their ranting, a glazed King Edward VII stared stolidly out of a Christmas lithograph, with his Orders on his royal breast.

Mr. Thripp's kitchen table was at this moment disordered with the remains of a meal, straggling over a tablecloth that had now gallantly completed its full week's service. Like all Saturday dinners in his household, this

has been a hugger-mugger dinner—one of vehement relays. Mr. Thripp himself had returned home from his office at a quarter to two—five minutes after his daughter Millie and Mrs. Thripp had already begun. Charlie Thripp had made his appearance a little before the hour; and James—who somehow had never become Jim or Jimmie—arrived soon afterwards. To each his due, kept warm.

But the hasty feeding was now over. Mr. Thripp in his shirt-sleeves, and with his silver watch-chain disposed upon his front, had returned once more from the scullery with his empty tray. He was breathing heavily, for he inclined nowadays, as he would sometimes confess, to the *ongbongpong*. He had remarkably muscular arms for a man of his sedentary profession, that of ledger-clerk in Messrs. Bailey, Bailey and Company's counting house. His small eyes, usually half-hidden by their plump lids, were of a bright, clear blue. His round head was covered with close-cut hair; he had fullish lips, and his ample jowl always appeared as if it had been freshly shaved—even on Saturday afternoons.

Mr. Thripp delighted in Saturday afternoons. He delighted in house-work. Though he never confessed it to a living soul (and even though it annoyed Tilda to hear him) he delighted too in imitating the waitresses in the tea-shops, and rattled the plates and dishes together as if they were made of a material unshatterable and everlasting. When alone at the sink he would hiss like a groom currying a full-grown mare. He packed the tray full of dirty dishes once more, and returned into the steam of the scullery.

"You get along now, Tilda," he said to his wife who

was drying up. "We shall have that Mrs. Brown knocking every minute, and that only flusters you."

Mrs. Thripp looked more ill-tempered than she really was—with her angular face and chin, pitch-dark eyes, and dark straight hair. With long damp fingers she drew back a limp strand of hair that had straggled over her forehead.

"What beats me is, you never take a bit of enjoyment yourself," she replied. "It isn't fair to *us*. I slave away, morning, noon and night; but that's just as things are. But other husbands get out and about; why not you? *Let* her knock! She's got too much money to waste; that's what's the matter with *her*. I don't know what you wouldn't take her for in that new get-up she's got."

Then what the devil do you go about with her for? were the words that entered Mr. Thripp's mind; and as for slaving, haven't I just *asked* you to give over? Have reason, woman! But he didn't utter them. "That'll be all right," he said instead, in his absurd genial way. "You get on along off, Tilda; I'll see to all this. I enjoy myself my own way, don't you fear. Did you never hear of the selfish sex? Well, that's me!"

"Oh yes, I know all about that," said his wife sententiously: "a pinch of salt on a bird's tail! But there's no need for sarcasms. Now do be careful with that dish, there. It don't belong to us, but to next door. She gave me one of her pancakes on it—and nothing better than a shapeless bit of leather, either. Just to show she was once in service as a cook-general, I suppose; though she never owns to it."

A spiteful old mischief-maker, if you asked me, was

Mr. Thripp's inward comment. But "Oh well, Tilda, she means all right," he said soothingly. "Don't you worry. Now get along off with you; it's a hard day, Saturday, but you won't know yourself when you come down again." As if forced into a line of conduct she deprecated and despised, Tilda flung her wet tea-cloth over a chair, and, with heart beating gaily beneath her shrunken breast, hastened away.

Mr. Thripp began to whistle under his breath as he turned on the hot water tap again. It was the one thing he insisted on—a lavish supply of hot water. He was no musician and only himself knew the tune he was in search of; but it kept him going as vigorously as a company of grenadiers on the march, and he invariably did his household jobs against time. It indulged a sort of gambling instinct in him; and the more he hated his job the louder he whistled. So as a small boy he had met the challenge of the terrors of the dark. "Keep going," he would say. "Don't let things mess over. That's waste!"

At that moment, his elder son, James, appeared in the scullery doorway. James took after his mother's side of the family. In his navy blue serge suit, light-brown shoes, mauve socks and spotted tie, he showed what careful dressing can do for a man. A cigarette sagged from his lower lip. His head was oblong, and flat-sided, and his eyes had a damp and vacant look. He thrust his face an inch or two into the succulent steam beyond the doorway.

"Well, dad, I'm off," he said.

Oh, my God! thought his father; if only you'd drop those infernal fags. Smoke, smoke, smoke, morning to night; and you that pasty-looking I can't imagine what

the girl sees in you, with your nice superior ways. "Right you are, my son," he said aloud, "I won't ask you to take a hand! Enjoy yourself while you're young, I say. But slow and steady does it. Where might *you* be bound for this afternoon?"

"Oh, tea with Ivy's people," said James magnanimously. "Pretty dull going, I can tell you."

"But it won't be tea all the evening, I suppose?" said his father, pushing a steaming plate into the plate-rack.

"Oh, I dare say we shall loaf off to a Revoo or something," said James. He tossed his cigarette end into the sink, but missed the refuse strainer. Mr. Thripp picked it up with a fork and put it into the receptacle it was intended for, while James "lit up" again.

"Well, so long," said his father, "don't spoil that Sunday-go-to-Meeting suit of yours with all this steam. And by the way, James, I owe you five shillings for that little carpentering job you did for me. It's on the sitting-room shelf."

"Right ho. Thanks, dad," said James. "I thought it was six. But never mind."

His father flashed a glance at his son—a glance like the smouldering of a coal. "That so? Well, make it six, then," he said. "And I'm much obliged."

"Oh, that's nothing," replied James graciously. "Cheerio; don't overdo it, dad."

Mr. Thripp returned to his washing-up. He was thinking rapidly with an extraordinary medley of feeling —as if he were not one Mr. Thripp, but many. None the less, his whistling broke out anew, as though, like a canary, in rivalry with the gushing of the tap. After loading up his tray with crockery for the last time, he put

its contents away in the cupboard, and on the kitchen dresser; cleansed the drain, swabbed up the sink, swabbed up the cracked cement floor, hung up his dish-clout, rinsed his hands, and returned into the kitchen.

Millie in a neat, tailor-made costume which had that week marvellously survived dyeing, was now posed before the little cracked square of kitchen looking-glass. She was a pale, slim thing. Her smooth hair, of a lightish brown streaked with gold and parted in the middle, resembled a gilded frame surrounding her mild angelic face—a face such as the mediæval sculptors in France delighted to carve on their altar-pieces. Whatever she wore became her—even her skimpy old pale-blue flannel dressing-gown.

She turned her narrow pretty face sidelong under her hat and looked at her father. She looked at every human being like that—even at her own reflection in a shop window, even at a flower in a glass. She spent her whole life subtly, instinctively, wordlessly courting. She had as many young men as the White Queen has pawns: though not all of them remained long in her service.

It's all very well to be preening yourself in that mirror, my girl, her father was thinking, but you'd be far better off in the long run if you did a bit more to help your mother, even though you do earn a fraction of your living. More thinking and less face, *I* say. And all that——! But "Why, I never see such a girl as you, Millie," he greeted her incredulously, "for looking your best! And such a best, too, my dear. Which young spark is it to be *this* afternoon? Eh?"

"Sparks! dad; how you do talk. Why, I don't hardly know, dad. Sparks!" Millie's voice almost invariably

ran down the scale like the notes of a dulcimer muted with velvet. "I wasn't thinking of anybody in particular," she went on, continuing to watch her moving mouth in the glass, "but I promised Nellie Gibbs I . . . One thing, I am not going to stay out long on a day like this!"

"What's the matter with the day?" Mr. Thripp enquired.

"The matter! Why, look at it! It's a fair filthy mug of a day." The words slipped off her pretty curved lips like pearls over satin. A delicious anguish seemed to have arched the corners of her eyelids.

"Well, ain't there such a thing as a mackingtosh in the house, then?' enquired her father briskly.

"Mackingtosh! Over this! Oh, isn't that just like a man! I should look a perfect guy." She stood gazing at him, like a gazelle startled by the flurry of a breeze across the placid surface of its drinking-pool.

Now see you here, my girl, that see-saw voice inside her father was expostulating once more, what's the good of them fine silly airs? I take you for an honest man's daughter with not a ha'penny to spare on fal-lals and monkey-traps. *That* won't get you a husband. But Mr. Thripp once more ignored its interruption. He smiled almost roguishly out of his bright blue eyes at his daughter. "Ask *me* what I take you for, my dear? Why, I take you for a nice, well-meaning, though remarkably plain young woman. Eh? But there, there, don't worry. What I say is, make sure of the best (and the best that's *inside*) and let the other young fellows go."

He swept the last clean fork on the table into the drawer and folded up the tablecloth.

'Oh, dad, how you do go on!" breathed Millie. "It's

always fellows you're thinking of. As if fellows made any difference." Her glance roamed a little startledly round the room. "What *I* can't understand," she added quickly, "is why we never have a clean tablecloth. How can anybody ask a friend home to their own place if that's the kind of thing they are going to eat off of?" The faint nuance of discontent in her voice only made it the more enchanting and seductive. She might be Sleeping Beauty babbling out of her dreams.

A cataract of invective coursed through the channels of Mr. Thripp's mind. He paused an instant to give the soiled tablecloth another twist and the table another prolonged sweep of that formidable right arm which for twenty-three years had never once been lifted in chastisement of a single one of his three offspring. Then he turned and glanced at the fire.

"I wouldn't," he said, seizing the shovel, "I wouldn't let mother hear that, my dear. We all have a good many things to put up with. And what I say is, all in good time. *You* bring that Mr. Right along! and I can promise him not only a clean tablecloth but something appetising to eat off of it. A bit of a fire in the sitting-room too, for that matter."

"You're a good sort, dad," said Millie, putting up her face to be kissed—in complete confidence that the tiny powder-puff in her vanity-bag would soon adjust any possible mishap to the tip of her small nose. "But I don't believe you ever think *I* think of anything."

"Good-bye, my dear," said Mr. Thripp; "don't kiss me. I am all of a smother with the washing-up."

"Toodle-loo, ma," Millie shrilled, as her father followed her out into the passage. He drew open the front door,

secreting his shirt-sleeves well behind it in case of curious passers-by.

"Take care of yourself, my dear," he called after her, "and don't be too late."

"Late!" tossed Millie, "any one would think I had been coddled up in a hot-house."

Out of a seething expense of spirit in Mr. Thripp's mind only a few words made themselves distinct. "Well, never mind, my precious dear. I'm *with* you for ever, whether you know it or not."

He returned into the house, and at once confronted his younger son, Charlie, who was at that moment descending the stairs. As a matter of fact he was descending the stairs like fifteen Charlies, and nothing so much exasperated his father as to feel the whole house rock on its foundations at each fresh impact.

"Off to your Match, my boy?" he cried. "Some day I expect you will be taking a hand in the game yourself. Better share than watch!"

Every single Saturday afternoon during the football season Mr. Thripp ventured to express some such optimistic sentiment as this. But Charlie had no objection; not at all.

"Not me, dad," he assured him good-humouredly. "I'd sooner pay a bob to see other fellows crocked up. You couldn't lend me one, I suppose?"

"Lend you what?"

"Two tanners; four frippenies; a twelfth of a gross of coppers."

Good God! yelled Mr. Thripp's inward monitor, am I *never* to have a minute's rest or relief? But it yelled in vain.

"Right you are, my son," he said instead, and thrusting his fleshy hand into his tight-fitting trouser-pocket he brought out a fistful of silver and pence. "And there," he added, "there's an extra sixpence free, *gratis,* and for nothing, for the *table d'hôte.* All I say is, Charlie, better say 'give' when there isn't much chance of keeping to the 'lend.' I don't want to preach; but that's always been *my* rule; and kept it too, as well as I could."

Charles counted the coins in his hand, and looked at his father. He grinned companionably. He invariably found his father a little funny to look at. He seemed somehow to be so remote from anything you could mean by things as they are, and things as they are now. He wasn't so much old-fashioned, as just a Gone-by. He was his father, of course, just as a jug is a jug, and now and then Charlie was uncommonly fond of him, longed for his company, and remembered being a little boy walking with him in the Recreation Ground. But he wished he wouldn't be always giving advice, and especially the kind of advice which he had himself assiduously practised.

"Ta, dad," he said; "that's doing me proud. I'll buy you a box of Havanas with what's over from the *table d'hôte.* And now we're square. Good-bye, dad." He paused as he turned to go. "Honour bright," he added, "I hope I shall be earning a bit more soon, and then I shan't have to ask you for anything."

A curious shine came into Mr. Thripp's small lively eyes; it seemed almost to spill over on to his plump cheeks. It looked as if those cheeks had even paled a little.

"Why, that's all right, Charlie, me boy," he mumbled,

"I'd give you the skin off me body if it would be of any use. That's all right. Don't stand about too long but just keep going. What I can't abide is these young fellows that swallow down their enjoyments like so much black draught. But we are not that kind of a family, I'm thankful to say."

"Not me!" said Charles, with a grimace like a good-humoured marmoset, and off he went to his soccer match.

Hardly had the sound of his footsteps ceased—and Mr. Thripp stayed there in the passage, as if to listen till they were for ever out of hearing—when there came a muffled secretive tap on the panel of the door. At sound of it the genial podgy face blurred and blackened.

Oh, it's you, you cringing Jezebel, is it?—the thought scurried through his mind like a mangy animal. Mr. Thripp indeed was no lover of the ultra-feminine. He either feared it, or hated it, or both feared *and* hated it. It disturbed his even tenour. It was a thorn in the side of the Mr. Thripp that not only believed second thoughts were best, but systematically refused to give utterance to first. Any sensible person, he would say, ought to know when he's a bit overtaxed, and act according.

The gloved fingers, Delilah-like, had tapped again. Mr. Thripp tiptoed back into the kitchen, put on his coat, and opened the door.

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. Brown," he said. "Tilda won't be a moment. She's upstairs titivating. Come in and take a seat."

His eyes meanwhile were informing that inward censor of his precisely how many inches thick the mauvish face-powder lay on Mrs. Brown's cheek, the liver-coloured lip-stick on her mouth, and the dye on her loaded eye-

lashes. Those naturally delicate lashes swept down in a gentle fringe upon her cheek as she smiled in reply. She was a graceful thing, too, but practised; and far more feline, far far more body-conscious than Millie. No longer in the blush of youth either; though still mistress of the gift that never leaves its predestined owner—the impulse and power to fascinate mere man. Still, there were limitations even to Mrs. Brown's orbit of attraction, and Mr. Thripp might have been Neptune itself he kept himself so far out in the cold.

He paused a moment at the entrance to the sitting-room, until his visitor had seated herself. He was eyeing her Frenchified silk scarf, her demure new hat, her smart high-heeled patent-leather shoes, but his eyes dropped like stones when he discovered her own dark languishing ones surveying him from under that hat's beguiling brim.

"Nice afternoon after the rain," he remarked instantly. "Going to the pictures, I suppose? As for meself, these days make me want to be out and in at the same time. It's the musty, fusty, smoky dark of them places *I* can't stand."

Mrs. Brown rarely raised her voice much above a whisper. Indeed it appeared to be a physical effort to her to speak at all. She turned her face a little sidelong, her glance on the carpet. "Why, it's the dark I enjoy, Mr. Thripp," she said. "It"—and she raised her own—"it rests the eyes so."

For an instant Mr. Thripp's memory returned to Millie, but he made no comment.

"Here's Mrs. Brown, Tilda," he called up the staircase. Good heavens, the woman might as well be the

real thing, the voice within was declaring. But the words that immediately followed up this piece of news were merely, "You'll be mighty surprised to hear, Tilda, Mrs. Brown's got a new hat." A faint catcall of merriment descended the stairs.

"Oh, now, Mr. Thripp, listen to that!" whispered the peculiar voice from out of the little airless sitting-room, "you always did make fun of me, Mr. Thripp. Do I deserve it, now?"

A gentle wave of heat coursed over Mr. Thripp as he covertly listened to these accents, but he was out of sight.

"Fun, Mrs. Brown? Never," he retorted gallantly; "it's only my little way." And then to his immense relief on lifting his eyes, discovered Tilda already descending the stairs.

He saw the pair of them off. Being restored to his coat, he could watch them clean down the drying street from his gate-post. Astonishing, he thought, what a difference there can be in two women's backs! Tilda's, straight, angular, and respectable, as you might say; and that other—sinuous, seductive, as if it were as crafty a means of expression as the very smile and long-lashed languishments upon its owner's face. "What can the old woman see in her!" he muttered to himself; "damned if *I* know!" On this problem Mr. Thripp firmly shut his front door. Having shut it he stooped to pick up a tiny white feather on the linoleum; and stooping, sighed.

At last his longed-for hour had come—the hour for which his very soul pined throughout each workaday week. Not that it was always his happy fate to be left completely alone like this. At times, indeed, he had for company far too much housework to leave him any lei-

sure. But to-day the dinner things were cleared away, the washing-up was over, the tables fair as a baker's board, the kitchen spick and span, the house empty. He would just have a look round his own and Tilda's bedroom (and, maybe, the boys' and Millie's). And then the chair by the fire; the simmering kettle on the hearth; and the soft tardy autumnal dusk fading quietly into night beyond the window.

It was a curious thing that a man who loved his family so much, who was as desperately loyal to every member of it as a she-wolf is to her cubs, should yet find this few minutes' weekly solitude a luxury such as only Paradise, one would suppose, would ever be able to provide.

Mr. Thripp went upstairs and not only tidied up his own and Tilda's bedroom, and went on to Millie's and the boys', but even gave a sloosh to the bath, slid the soap out of the basin where Charles had abandoned it, and hung up the draggled towels again in the tiny bathroom. What a place looks like when you come back to it from your little enjoyments—it's *that* makes all the difference to your feelings about a home. These small chores done, Mr. Thripp put on an old tweed coat with frayed sleeves, and returned to the kitchen. In a quarter of an hour that too more than ever resembled a new pin.

Then he glanced up at the clocks; between them the time was a quarter to four. He was amazed. He laid the tea, took out of his little old leather bag a pot of jam which he had bought for a surprise on his way home, and arranged a bunch of violets in a small jar beside Tilda's plate. But apart from these family preparations, Mr. Thripp was now depositing a demure little glossy brown teapot all by itself on the kitchen range. This was

his Eureka. This was practically the only sensual *secret* luxury Mr. Thripp had ever allowed himself since he became a family man. Tilda's cooking was good enough for him provided that the others had their little dainties now and then. He enjoyed his beer, and could do a bit of supper occasionally with a friend. But the ritual of these solitary Saturday afternoons reached its climax in this small pot of tea. First the nap sweet as nirvana in his easy-chair, then the tea, and then the still, profound quarter of an hour's musing before the door-knocker began again.

Having pulled down the blind a little in order to prevent any chance of draught, Mr. Thripp eased his boot-laces, sat himself in his chair, his cheek turned a little away from the window, his feet on the box that usually lay under the table, and with fingers clasped over his stomach composed himself to sleep. The eyelids closed; the lips set; the thumbs twitched now and again. He breathed deep, and the kettle began a whispered anthem —as if a myriad voices were singing on and on without need of pause or rest, a thousand thousand leagues away.

But now there was none to listen; and beyond quiet hung thick in the little house. Only the scarce-perceptible hum of the traffic at the end of the narrow side street was audible on the air. Within, the two clocks on the chimney-piece quarrelled furiously over the fleeting moments, attaining unanimity only in one of many ticks. Ever and again a tiny scutter of dying ashes rejoined those that had gone before in the pan beneath the fire. Soon even these faint stirrings became inaudible and in a few moments Mr. Thripp's spirit would have wafted itself completely free awhile from its earthly tenement,

if, suddenly, the image of Millie—more vivid than even the actual sight of her a few minutes before—had not floated up into the narrow darkness of her father's tight-shut eyes.

But this was not the image of Millie as her father usually saw her. A pathetic earthly melancholy lay over the fair angelic features. The young cheek was sunken in; the eye was faded, dejected, downcast; and her cheek was stubbornly turned away from her father, as if she resented or was afraid of his scrutiny.

At this vision a headlong anxiety darted across Mr. Thripp's half-slumbering mind. His heart began heavily beating: and then a pulse in his forehead. Where was she now? What forecast, what warning was this? Millie was no fool. Millie knew her way about. And her mother if anything was perhaps a little too censorious of the ways of this wicked world. If you keep on talking at a girl, hinting of things that might otherwise not enter her head—that in itself is dangerous. Love itself even must edge in warily. The tight-shut lids blinked anxiously. But where was Millie now? Somewhere indoors, but where? Who with?

Mr. Thripp saw her first in a teashop, sitting opposite a horrid young man with his hair greased back over his low round head, and a sham pin in his tie. His elbows were on the marble-top table, and he was looking at Millie very much as a young but experienced pig looks at his wash-trough. Perhaps she was at the Pictures? Dulcet accents echoed into the half-dreaming mind— "But I enjoy the dark, Mr. Thripp. . . . It rests the eyes." Why did the woman talk as if she had never more than half a breath to spare? Rest her eyes! She never at any

rate wanted to rest the eyes of any fool in trousers who happened to be within glimpse of her own. It was almost unnaturally dark in the cinema of Mr. Thripp's fancy at this moment; yet he could now see his Millie with her pale, harmless, youthful face, as plainly as if she were the "close-up" of some star from Los Angeles on the screen. And now the young man in her company was almost as fair as herself, with a long-chinned sheepish face and bolting eyes; and the two of them were amorously hand in hand.

For a moment Mr. Thripp sat immovable, as if a bugle had sounded in his ear. Then he deliberately opened his eyes and glanced about him. The November daylight was already beginning to fade. Yes, he would have a word with Millie—but not when she came home that evening. It is always wiser to let the actual coming-home be pleasant and welcoming. To-morrow morning, perhaps; that is, if her mother was not goading at her for being late down and lackadaisical when there was so much to be done. Nevertheless, all in good time he would have a little quiet word with her. He would say only what he would not afterwards regret having said. He had meant to do that ages ago; but you mustn't flood a house with water when it's not on fire. She was but a mere slip of a thing—like a flower, not a wild flower, but one of those sweet waxen flowers you see blooming in a florist's window—which you must be careful with and not just expose anywhere.

And yet how his own little place here could be compared with anything in the nature of a hot-house he could not for the life of him understand. Delicate-looking! Everybody said that. God bless me, perhaps her very

lackadaisicalness was a symptom of some as yet hidden malady. Good God, supposing! . . . He would take her round to see the doctor as soon as he could. But the worst of it was you had to do these things on your own responsibility. And though Mr. Thripp was now a man close on fifty, sometimes he felt as if he could no longer bear the burden of all these responsibilities. Sometimes he felt as if he couldn't endure to brood over them as he was sometimes wont to do. If he did, he would snap. People *looked* old; but nobody was really old inside; not old at least in the sense that troubles were any the lighter, or forebodings any the more easily puffed away; or tongues easier to keep still; or tempers to control.

And talking of tempers reminded him of Charlie. What on earth was going to be done with Charlie? There was no difficulty in conjuring up, in seeing Charlie —that is if he really did go every Saturday to a football match. But Charlie was now of an age when he might think it a fine manly thing to be loafing about the counter of a pub talking to some flaxen barmaid with a tuppeny cigar between his teeth. Still, Mr. Thripp refused to entertain more than a glimpse of this possibility. He saw him at this moment as clearly as if in a peepshow, packed in with hundreds of other male creatures close as sardines in a tin, with their check caps and their "fags," and their staring eyes revolving in consort as if they were all attached to one wire, while that idiotic ball in the middle of the arena coursed on its helpless way from muddy boot to muddy boot.

Heaven knows, Mr. Thripp himself was nothing much better than a football! You had precious small chance in this life of choosing which boot should give you the

next kick. And what about that smug new creeping accountant at the office with his upstart airs and new-fangled book-keeping methods!

Mr. Thripp's mouth opened in a yawn, but managed only to achieve a fraction of it. He rubbed his face; his eyes now shut again. It was not as if any of your children were of much practical help. Why should they be when they could never understand that what you pined for, what you really needed was not only practical help but some inward grace and clearness of mind wherewith they could slip in under your own thoughts and so share your point of view without all that endless terrifying argumentation. He didn't *always* give advice to suit his own ends; and yet whenever he uttered a word to James, tactfully suggesting that in a world like this—however competent a man may be and however sure of himself—you *had* to push your way, you had to make your weight felt, James always looked at him as if he were a superannuated orang-outang in a cage—an orang-outang with queer and not particularly engaging habits.

He wouldn't mind even that so much if only James would take his cigarette out of his mouth when he talked. To see that bit of stained paper attached to his son's lower lip wagging up and down, beneath that complacent smile and those dark helpless-looking eyes, all but sent Mr. Thripp stark staring mad at times. Once, indeed, he had actually given vent to the appalling mass of emotion hoarded up like water in a reservoir in his mind. The remembrance of the scene that followed made him even at this moment tremble in his chair. Thank God, thank God, he hadn't often lost control like that.

Well, James would be married by this time next year,

he supposed. And what a nice dainty pickle he was concocting for himself! Mr. Thripp knew that type of young woman, with the compressed lips, and the thin dry hair, and the narrow hips. She'd be a "good manager," right enough, but that's a point in married life where good managing is little short of being in a lunatic asylum between two iron-faced nurses and yourself in a strait waistcoat. The truth of it was, with all his fine airs and neat finish, James hadn't much common-sense. He had a fair share of brains; but brains are no good if you are merely self-opinionated and contemptuous on principle. James was not like anybody in Mr. Thripp's own family. He was a Simpkins.

And then suddenly it was as if some forgotten creature in Mr. Thripp's mind or heart had burst out crying; and the loving look he thereupon cast on his elder son's face in his mind was almost maudlin in its sentimentality. He would do anything for James within reason: anything. But then it would have to be within James's reason—not his own. He knew that. Why he would himself marry the young woman and exult in being a bigamist if only he could keep his son out of her way. And yet, and yet; maybe there were worse women in the world than your stubborn, petulant, niggardly, half-sexed nagger. Mr. Thripp knew a nagger of old. His brother's wife, Fanny, had been a nagger. She was dead now, and George was a free man—but drinking far too much.

Well, as soon as he could get a chance, Mr. Thripp, sitting there in his chair decided, he would have another good think; but that probably wouldn't be until next Saturday, if then. You can't think to much purpose—ex-

cept in a worried disjointed fashion—when you are in the noise of an office or keeping yourself from saying things you have no wish to say. The worst of it was it was not much good discussing these matters with Tilda. Like most women, she always went off at a tangent. And when you came down to it, and wanted to be reasonable, there was so little left to discuss. Besides, Tilda had worries enough of her own.

At this moment Mr. Thripp once more opened his eyes wide. The small kitchen loomed beatifically rosy and still in the glow of the fire. Evening had so far edged on its way now that he could hardly see the hands of his two clocks. He could but just detect the brass pendulum—imperturbably chopping up eternity into fragments of time. He craned forward; in five minutes he ought to be brewing his little private pot of tea. Even if he nodded off now, he would be able to wake in time, but five minutes doesn't leave *much* margin for dropping off. He shifted a little on his chair, and once more shut his eyes. And in a moment or two his mind went completely blank.

He seemed to have been suddenly hauled up helpless with horror into an enormous vacancy—to be dangling unconfined and motionless in space. A scene of wild sandy hills and spiky trees—an illimitable desert, came riding towards him out of nothingness. He hung motionless, and was yet sweeping rapidly forward, but for what purpose and to what goal there was not the smallest inkling. The wilderness before him grew ever more desolate and menacing. He began to be deadly afraid; groaned; stirred—and found himself with fingers clenched on its arms sitting bolt upright in his chair. And the hands of the

clock looked to be by a hair's breadth precisely in the same position as when he had started on that ghastly nightmare journey. His face blanched. He sat appalled, listening to an outrageous wauling of voices. It was as though a thousand demons lay in wait for him beneath his window and were summoning him to his doom.

And all this nightmare horror of mind was due solely to a wailing of cats! And yet even as with flesh still creeping he listened on to this clamour, it was so human in effect that it might be multitudinous shades of the unborn that were thronging about the glass of his window. Mr. Thripp rose from his chair, his face transfigured with rage and desire for revenge. He went out into the scullery, opened the back door, and at sound of him the caterwauling instantly ceased.

And almost as instantly his fury died out in him. The cold evening air fanned his forehead. He smiled quixotically, and looked about him. There came a furtive rustle in the bushes. "Ah, there you are!" he sang out gently into the dark. "Have your play while you can, my fine gentlemen! Take it like your betters, for it's —a sight too soon over."

Above the one cramped leafless elder-tree in his yard a star was pricking the sky. A ground mist, too, was rising, already smelling a little stale. Great London and its suburbs appeared to be in for one of its autumnal fogs. A few of the upper windows opposite loomed dim with light. Mr. Thripp's neighbours, it seemed, were also preparing to be off to the pictures or the music-halls. It was very still, and the air was damp and clammy.

As he stood silent there in the obscurity a deepening melancholy crept over his mind, though he was unaware into what gloomy folds and sags his face had fallen. He suddenly remembered that his rates would have to be paid next week. He remembered that Christmas would soon be coming, and that he was getting too old to enter into the fun of the thing as he used to do. His eyes rolled a little in their sockets. What the . . . ! his old friend within began to suggest. But Mr. Thripp himself did not even enunciate the missing "hell." Instead, he vigorously rubbed his face with his stout capable hand. "Well, fog anyhow don't bring rain," he muttered to himself.

And as if at a signal his own cat and his nextdoor neighbour's cat and Mrs. Brown's cat and the cat of the painter and decorator whose back garden abutted his own, together with the ginger-and-white cat from a newsvendor's beyond, with one consent broke out once more into their Sabbath eve quintette. The many-stranded strains of it mounted up into the heavens like the yells of demented worshippers of Baal.

"And, as I say, I don't blame ye neether," Mr. Thripp retorted, with a grim smile. "If you knew, my friends, how narrowly you some of you escaped a bucket of cold water when you couldn't even see out of your young eyes, you'd sing twice as loud."

He shut the door and returned to his fireside. No more hope of sleep that afternoon. He laughed to himself for sheer amusement at his disappointment. What kids men were! He stirred the fire; it leapt brightly as if intent to please him. He pushed the kettle on; lit the

lamp; warmed his little privy glossy-brown teapot, and fetched out a small private supply of the richest Ceylon from behind some pots in the saucepan cupboard.

Puffs of steam were now vapouring out of the spout of the kettle with majestic pomposity. Mr. Thripp lifted it off the coals and balanced it over his teapot. And at that very instant the electric bell—which a year or two ago in a moment of the strangest caprice Charles had fixed up in the corner—began jangling like a fire-alarm. Mr. Thripp hesitated. If this was one of the family, he was caught. Caught, that is, unless he was mighty quick in concealing these secret preparations. If it was Tilda —well, valour was the better part of discretion. He poured the water into the pot, replaced the lid, and put it on to the oventop to stew. With a glance of satisfaction at the spinster-like tidiness of the room, he went out, and opened the door.

"Why, it's Millie!" he said, looking out at the slim-shouldered creature standing alone there under the porch; "you don't mean to say it's you, my dear?"

Millie made no reply. Her father couldn't see her face, partly because the lamp-post stationed in front of the house three doors away gave at best a feeble light, and partly because her features were more or less concealed by her hat. She pushed furtively past him without a word, her head still stooping out of the light.

Oh, my God, what's wrong now? yelled her father's inward monstrous monitor, frenziedly clanging the fetters on wrist and ankle. "Come right in, my pretty dear," said Mr. Thripp seductively, "this *is* a pleasant surprise. And what's more, between you and me and the gatepost, I have just been making myself a cup of

tea. Not a word to mother; its *our* little secret. We'll have it together before the others come in."

He followed his daughter into the kitchen.

"Lor, what a glare you are in, pa!" she said in a small muffled voice. She turned the wick of the lamp down so low that in an instant or two the flame flickered and expired, and she seated herself in her father's chair by the fire. But the flamelight showed her face now. It was paler even than usual. A strand of her gilded pale-brown hair had streaked itself over her blue-veined temple. She looked as if she had been crying. Her father, his hands hanging down beside him as uselessly as the front paws of a performing bear, watched her in an appalling trepidation of spirit. This then was the secret of his nightmare; for this the Cats of Fate had chorused!

"What's wrong, Millie love? Are you overtired, my girl? There! Don't say nothing for a minute or two. See, here's my little pot just meant for you and me!"

Millie began to cry again, pushing her ridiculous little handkerchief close to her eyes. Mr. Thripp's hand hovered awkwardly above her dainty hat and then gently fumbled as if to stroke her hair beneath. He knelt down beside her chair.

For heaven's sake! for heaven's sake! for heaven's sake! a secret voice was gabbling frenziedly in his ear. "Tell your old dad, lovey," he murmured out loud, softly as the crooning of a wood-pigeon.

Millie tilted back her pretty hat and dropped her fair head on his shoulder. "It's nothing, dad," she said. "It's only that they are all the same."

"What are all the same?"

"Oh, fellows, dad."

"Which one, precious?" Mr. Thripp lulled wooingly. God strike him dead! muttered his monster.

"Oh, only young Arthur. Like a fool I waited half an hour for him and then saw him with—with that Westcliff girl."

A sigh as voluminous as the suspiration of Niagara swept over Mr. Thripp; but it made no sound. Half a dozen miraculous words of reassurance were storming his mind in a frenzy of relief. He paused an instant, and accepted the seventh.

"What's all that, my precious?" he was murmuring. "Why, when I was courting your mother, I saw just the same thing happen. She was a mighty pretty young thing, too, as a girl, though not quite so trim and neat in the figure as you. I felt I could throttle him where he stood. But no, I just took no notice, trusting in my own charms!"

"That's all very well," sobbed Millie, "but you were a man, and *we* have to fight without seeming to. Not that I care a fig for him: he can go. But——"

"Lord, Millie!" Mr. Thripp interrupted, smoothing her cheek with his squat forefinger, "you'd beat twenty of them Westcliffs, with a cast in both eyes and your hands behind your back. Don't you grieve no more, my dear; he'll come back safe and sound, or he's less of a—of a nice young feller than I take him for."

For a moment Mr. Thripp caught a glimpse of the detestable creature with the goggling eyes and the suède shoes, but he dismissed him sternly from view.

"There now," he said, "give your poor old dad a kiss. What's disappointments, Millie; they soon pass away. And now, just take a sip or two of this extra-strong

Bohay! I was hoping I shouldn't have to put up with a lonely cup and not a soul to keep me company. But mind, my precious, not a word to your ma."

So there they sate, father and daughter, comforter and comforted, while Mr. Thripp worked miracles for two out of a teapot for one. And while Millie, with heart comforted, was musing on that other young fellow she had noticed boldly watching her while she was waiting for her Arthur, Mr. Thripp was wondering when it would be safe and discreet to disturb her solacing daydream so that he might be busying himself over the supper.

It's one dam neck-and-neck worry and trouble after another, his voice was assuring him. But meanwhile, his plain square face was serene and gentle as a nestful of halcyons, as he sat sipping his hot water and patting his pensive Millie's hand.

Pretty Poll

N her odd impulsive fashion—her piece of sewing pressed tight to her small bosom, her two small feet as close to one another on the floor—Judy had laughed out: and the sound of it had a faint far-away resemblance of bells—bells muffled, in the sea. "You never, never, never speak of marriage," she charged Tressider, "without being satirical. You just love to make nonsense of us all. Now I say you have no right to. You haven't earned the privilege. Wait till you've jilted Cleopatra, or left your second-best bed to—to Catherine Parr—if she *was* the last. Don't you agree, Stella?"

The slight lifting at the corners of dark handsome Stella's mouth could hardly have been described as a smile. "I always agree," she assented. "And surely, Mr. Tressider, isn't marriage an 'institution'? Mightn't you just as well attack a police-station? No one gets any good out of it. It only hurts."

"That's just it, Stella, it only hurts. It's water, after all, that has the best chance of wearing away stones—not horrid sledge-hammers like that."

From his low chair, his cleft clean-shaven chin resting on his hands, Tressider for a moment or two continued to look up and across the room at Judy, now absorbedly

busy again over her needlework. Time, too, wears like water; but little of its influence was perceptible there. The curtains at the French windows had been left undrawn; a moon was over the garden. It was Judy's choice—this mingling of the two lights—natural and artificial. Hers, too, the fire, this late summer evening. She stooped forward, thrusting out a slightly trembling hand towards its flames.

"No, it isn't fair," she said, "there are many married people who are at least, well endurably happy: Bill and me, for example. The real marvel is that any two ignorant chance young things who happen to be of opposite sex should ever just go on getting older and older, more and more used to one another, and all that—and yet not want a change—not really for a single instant. I knew dozens—apart from the others."

"Oh, I never meant to suggest that 'whited' are the only kind of sepulchres," said Tressider. "I agree, too, it's the substantial that wears longest. Second-best beds; rather than Wardour Street divans. But there are excesses—just human ones, I mean. It's this horrible curse of asking too much. Up there they seem to have supposed that the best ratio for a human being was one quart of feeling to every pint pot. I knew a man once, for example, who, quite apart from such little eurekas as the Dunmow flitch, never even made the attempt to become endurably happy, as you call it. Simply because of a parrot. It repeated things. It was an eavesdropper: an *agent provocateur.*"

"What *do* you mean?" said Judy. "Oh, how you amuse me! You haven't said a single thing this evening that was not ironical. You just love to masquerade.

Did you ever know a woman who talked parables? It's simply because, I suppose, men have such stupidly self-conscious hearts—I mean such absurdly rational minds. Isn't it, Stella? Don't be so reserved, you dark taciturn angel. Wouldn't he be even nicer than he is if he would only say what he thinks? A parrot!"

Stella merely desisted from shrugging her shoulders. "My own opinion, Judy—judging, that is, from what Mr. Tressider does say, is that it's far better that he should never say what he thinks."

As if itself part and parcel of Stella's normal taciturnity, this voice of hers, when it did condescend to make itself heard, was of a low rasping timbre, like the sound of a strip of silk being torn from its piece. And it usually just left off, came to an abrupt end—as if interrupted. She turned her head out of the candle-light, as though even moonshine might be a refuge from the mere bare facts of the case. There was a pause. Judy had snatched her glance, and was now busily fishing in her work-basket for her tiny scissors.

"Well, that's what I say," she said, staring close at the narrow hem of the ludicrously tiny shirt she was hemming. "You men love to hide your heads in the sands. Even Bill does—and you know what a body *he* leaves outside. You positively prefer not to know where you are. You invent ideals and goddesses and all that sort of thing; and yet you would sooner let things slide than—than break the ice. I mean—I mean, of course, the right ice. That can't be helped, I suppose. But what I simply cannot understand is being satirical. Here we all are, we men and women, and we just have to put up with it. In heaven," and the tiny click, click, click of her needle

had already begun again, "in heaven there will be neither marriage nor giving in marriage. And poor Bill will have to—have to darn his socks himself."

Her eyes lifted an instant, and glanced away so swiftly that it seemed to Tressider he caught no less fleeting a glimpse of their blue than that usually afforded of a kingfisher's wing. "But what," she went on hastily, "what about the parrot—the *agent provocateur?* What about the parrot, Stella? Let's make him tell us about the parrot."

"Yes," concurred Stella. "I should, of course, very much indeed enjoy hearing about the parrot. I just love natural history."

"You ought really, of course," said Tressider, "to have heard the story from a friend of my sister Kate's—Minnie Sturgess. It was she who was responsible for the tragic —the absurd—*finale*. It was she who cut the tether, or rather the painter. The kind of woman that simply can't take things easy. Intuitions, no end; but mostly of a raw hostile order. Anyhow, they weren't of much use in the case of a man like—well, like my friend with the parrot."

"We will call him Bysshe," said Judy. "It has romantic associations. Go on, Mr. Satirist."

"Bysshe, then," said Tressider. "Well, this Bysshe was a lanky, square-headed, black-eyed fellow. Something, I believe, in the ship-broking line, though with a little money of his own. A bit over thirty, and a bachelor from the thatch on his head to the inch-thick soles of his shoes. If his mother had lived—he was one of those 'mother's boys' which the novelists used to be so fond of —Minnie Sturgess might perhaps herself have survived

into his life, to keep, and, I wouldn't mind betting, even to prize the parrot. She would at any rate have learned the tact with which to dispose of it without undue friction. Minnie survived, in actual fact, to keep a small boarding-house at Ramsbate, though whether she is there now only the local directory could relate. As for Bysshe —well, I don't know, as a matter of fact, how long *he* survived. In Kate's view, the two of them were born to make each other unhappy. So Providence, to cut things short, supplied the parrot. But then Kate is something of a philosopher. And I have no views myself."

"Did you ever see the parrot?" queried Judy, her left eye screwed up a little as she threaded an almost invisible needle. "I remember an old servant of my mother's once had one, and it used to make love to her the very instant it supposed they were alone. But *she,* poor soul, wasn't too bright in her wits."

"Oh," said Tressider, "Bysshe was right enough in his wits. It was merely one of his many queer harmless habits—and he had plenty of spare time left over from his ship-broking—to moon about the city. He suffered from indigestion, or thought he did, and used to lunch on apples or nuts which, so far as he was concerned, did not require for their enjoyment a sitting posture. He was a genuine lover of London, though; knew as much about its churches and streets, taverns and relics as old Stowe or Pepys himself. Possibly, too, if his digestion had been a reasonable one, Minnie and he might have made each other's lives miserable to the end of the chapter; since in that case, he would never have found himself loafing about one particular morning in Leadenhall Mar-

ket; and so would never have set eyes on the parrot. Anyhow, that's how it all began.

"It was a sweltering day—clear black shadows, black as your hat, shafting clean across the narrow courts, and the air crammed with flavours characteristic of those parts—meat, poultry, sawdust, cats, straw, soot, and old bricks baking in the sun. He had meandered into one of the livestock alleys—mainly dogs, cats, poultry, with an occasional jackdaw, owl or raven. That kind of thing. And there, in a low entry, lounged the proprietor of one of its shops—a man with a face and head as hairless almost as a bladder of lard, and with eyes like a ferret.

"He was two steps up from the pavement, had a straw in the corner of his mouth, and was looking at Bysshe. And Bysshe was looking at one of his protégés, the edge of its cage glinting in a sunbeam, and the bird—or whatever you like to call it—mum and dreaming inside. Bysshe had finished his lunch, and was in a reflective mood. He stared on at the parrot almost to the point of vacancy.

" 'Nice dawg there,' insinuated an insolent voice above his head.

"He looked up, and for a moment absently surveyed the speaker. 'Does it talk?' enquired Bysshe. The owner of the bird merely continued to chew his straw.

" 'How do you teach them?' Bysshe persisted. 'You clip or snip their tongues, or something, don't you?'

"An intensely violent look came into the fellow's eyes. 'If you was to try to slit that bird's tongue,' he said, 'you might as well order your corfin here and now.'

"Bysshe's glance returned to the cage. Apart from

an occasional almost imperceptible obscuring of its scale-like shuttered eyes, its inmate might just as well have been stuffed. It sat there stagnantly surveying Bysshe as if he were one of the less intelligent apes. To start with, Bysshe didn't much like the look of the man. Naturally. Nor did he much like the look of the parrot. It was merely the following of an indolent habit that suggested his asking its price.

"He once more turned his attention from wizard-like bird to beast-like man. 'What's the price of the thing?' he enquired: 'and if I particularly wanted him to talk, could you make him?' The man rapidly shifted his straw from one corner of his mouth to the other.

" 'The feller,' he replied, 'that says that he could make that bird do anything but give up the ghost, is a liar.'

"Bysshe, when he told me about the deal, supplied the missing adjective. Still, such is life. The price was 25*s*. And as Bysshe had no more idea of the bird's value than that of an Egyptian pyramid, he didn't know whether he was getting a bargain or not. Nor did he attempt to beat the man down. He asked him a few questions about the proper food and treatment of the creature. Whereupon, squeezing one or two of his remaining lunch nuts between the bars, he picked up the cage by its ring, turned out of the shadowy coolness of the market into the burning glitter of Leadenhall Street, mounted on to the top of a 'bus, and bore his captive home.

"He had rooms in Clifford's Inn; and through the window the bird, if it so pleased, could feast its eyes on the greens and shadows of a magnificent plane-tree. The rooms were old—faded yellow panelling and a moulded cornice. It was quiet. Bysshe had few friends, and his

pet therefore could have enjoyed—even if it wanted any—little company. Bysshe bought it a handsome new cage, with slight architectural advantages, and was as perfectly ready to enjoy its silent society as he expected the bird to be prepared to enjoy his."

Stella gently withdrew her dark eyes from the moonlit garden, and stole a longish look at Tressider's face.

"I agree, Stella," cried Judy breaking it. "He *is* being rather a long time coming to what I suppose will be the point."

"So are most little human tragedies," retorted Tressider. "But there's one point I have left out. I said 'silent' society; and that at first was all Bysshe got. But I gathered that though there had been the usual din in the market the day of the bargain, it was some odd nondescript slight *sound* or other that had first caught his attention. A kind of call-note which appeared to have come out of the cage. Without being quite conscious of it, it seems to have been this faint rumour, at least as much as anything else, that persuaded him to invest in the bird.

"Well, anyhow, as he sat reading one evening—he had rather an odd and esoteric taste in books—there proceeded out of the cage one or two clear disjointed notes. Just a fragment of sound to which you could give no description or character except that it was unlike most of those which one expects from a similar source. Bysshe had instantly relapsed from one stage of stillness to another. Compared with what came after, this was nothing—mere 'recording' as the bird-fanciers say. But it set Bysshe on the *qui vive*. For a while he listened intently. There was no response. And he had

again almost forgotten the presence of the parrot when, hours afterwards, from the gloom that had crept into its corner, there softly broke out of the cage, no mere snatch of an inarticulate *bel canto,* but a low, slow, steady gush of indescribable abuse.

"The courtyard was as still as the garden of Eden. That less—that more—than human voice pressed steadily on—a low, minute, gushing fountain of vituperation. Bysshe was no chicken. He was pretty familiar with the various London lingoes—from Billingsgate to Soho. None the less the actual terms of this harangue, he afterwards told me, all but froze the blood in his veins. The voice ceased; and turning his head, Bysshe took a long and steady stare at the inmate of the cage. It sat there in its gray and cardinal; its curved beak closed, its glassy yellow eye motionless, and yet, it seemed, filled to its shallow brim with an inexhaustible contempt.

"There was nothing whatever wrong with its surroundings. Bysshe made quite certain of that. Its nuts were ripe and sound, its water fresh, its sand wholesome. As I say, at the first onset of this experience Bysshe had been profoundly shocked. But that night, as he stood in his pyjamas looking in at the bird for the last time —and he had omitted to throw over its cage its customary pall—the memory of it suddenly touched his sense of humour. And he began to laugh; an oddish laugh to laugh alone. The parrot lifted one clawed foot and gently readjusted it on its perch. It leaned its head sidelong; its beak opened. And then in frozen silence it turned its back on the interrupter.

"For days together after that the parrot was as mute as a fish—at least so long as Bysshe lay in wait for it.

That it had been less taciturn in his absence he gathered one morning from the expression of his charwoman's face—an amiable old body with a fairly wide knowledge of 'the world.' She had thought it best, she explained, to shut the windows. 'You never know, sir, what them might think who couldn't tell a canary from a bullfinch. I've kept birds myself. But I must say, sir, I wouldn't have chose to be brought up where *he* was." Something to that effect.

"And Bysshe noticed that though she had not refrained from putting some little emphasis on the 'he,' she had carefully omitted any indication to whom the pronoun referred.

"'He swore, did he, Mrs. Giles?'

"'He didn't so much swear, sir, as extravastate. Never in all my life could I have credited there was such shocking things to say.'

"Bysshe rather queerly returned the old lady's gaze. 'I have heard rumours of it myself,' he replied. 'It looks to me, Mrs. Giles, as if we should have to get the bird another home.'

"The interview was a little disconcerting, but had it not been for this independent evidence, Bysshe, I feel sure (judging from my own reactions, as they call them) might easily have persuaded himself to believe that his experience had been nothing but the refuse of a dream.

"Minnie Sturgess's first appearance on the scene preceded mine by a few days. The two of them, so far as I could gather, were not exactly 'engaged.' They merely, as the little irony goes, understood one another; or rather Minnie seemed so far to understand Bysshe that we all knew perfectly well they would at last drift into matri-

mony as inevitably as a derelict boat, I gather, having found its way out of Lake Erie will drift over the Niagara Falls."

"A very pretty metaphor," remarked Judy. "Then come the rapids, and then—but I'm not quite sure what happens then."

"Don't forget, though," cried Stella softly out of her moonshine, "don't forget that meanwhile the best electric light has been supplied for miles around!"

"Ssh! Stella," breathed Judy, thimbled finger on lip, "we are merely playing into his hands. Let him just blunder on." She turned with a mock-innocent smile towards Tressider. "And did the parrot *swear* at Miss Sturgess?" she enquired.

"No. Miss Sturgess came; she contemplated; she admired; she was tactful to the last degree. But the bird paid her no more polite attention than if she had been a waxwork in the basement at Madame Tussaud's. It sat perfectly still on its perch, its eight neat claws arranged four on either side of it, and out of its whitish countenance it softly surveyed the lady.

"Naturally, she was a little nettled. She remonstrated. Hadn't Bysshe assured her that the creature talked, and wasn't it a horrid cheat to have a parrot sold to one for all that money, if it didn't? And Bysshe, relieved beyond words, that his pet had not even so much as deigned to chuckle, prevaricated. He said that a parrot that talked in season and out of season was nothing but a nuisance. Did she like its livery, and wasn't it a handsome cage?"

"Miss Sturgess took courage. She bent her veiled head and whispered a seductive 'Pretty Poll'; and then having

failed to arouse any response by tapping its bars with the button of her glove, she insinuated a naked forefinger between them as if to stroke the creature's wing or to scratch its poll. And, without an instant's hesitation the parrot nipped it to the bone. She might have read that much in its air: intuition, you know. But she was a plucky creature, and didn't even whimper. And no doubt for the moment this summary punishment may seem to have drawn these two blundering humans a little closer together.

"It was a few days after this that Bysshe and I lunched together at a restaurant in Fleet Street. And, naturally —in his reticent fashion—he told me of his prize. About three, we climbed the shallow wooden stairs up to his rooms, to see the bird. For discretion's sake—in case, that is, of chance visitors, he had shut it up in his bedroom, and rather foolishly, as I thought, had locked the door.

"No creature of any intelligence can much enjoy existence in a cage, and to immure that cage in a kind of cell is merely to add insult to injury. Besides, even eighteenth century door panels are not sound-proof. We stole across on tiptoe and stood for a moment listening outside the bedroom.

"Possibly the bird had heard our muffled footsteps; or, maybe, to while solitude away, it was merely indulging in an audible reverie. I can't say. But hardly had we inclined our ears to listen, when, as if out of some vast hollow, dark and subterranean, a tongue within—unfalteringly, dispassionately—broke into speech. I have heard politicians, pill-venders and demagogues, but nothing even remotely to compare with that appalling eloquence

—the ease, the abundance, the sustained unpremeditated verve! Nor was it an exhibition of mere vernacular. There were interludes, as I guessed, of a corrupt Spanish. There may have been even an oriental leaven; even traces of the Zulu's 'click'—the trend was exotic enough. But the words, the mere language were as nothing compared with the tone.

"Curates habituated to their duties tend to read the prayers in much the same way. The inmost sense, I mean, comes out the better because the speaker is not taking any notice of it. So it was with the parrot. I can't describe the evil of the effect. One stopped thinking. One lost for the moment even the power of being shocked. A torrent of outer darkness seemed to sweep over, dowse, submerge the mind, and you just floated like a straw on its calm even flood."

"What was it swearing *about?*" asked a cold voice.

Tressider seemed to be examining the Persian mat at his feet as if in search of inspiration. "I think," he said slowly, "it was cursing the day of creation, with all the complexities involved in it. It was a voice out of nowhere, anathematising with loathing a very definite somewhere. We most of us 'bear up' in this world as much as possible. Not so the original owner of that unhurried speech. He had stated with perfect calm exactly what he thought about things. And I should guess that his name was Iago. But let's get back to Bysshe.

"At the moment he was holding his square, rather ugly face sidelong, in what looked like a constrained position. Then his eyes slid round and met mine.

"'Twenty-five shillings!' he said. 'Any offers?' But there wasn't anything facetious in his look.

"The voice had ceased. And with it had vanished all else but the remembrance of the execrable *tone* of its speech. And as if all Nature, including its topmost artifice, London, had paused to listen, there followed an intense hush. Then, uncertainly, as if tentatively, there broke out another voice from behind the shut door, uttering just three or four low single notes—as of somebody singing. Then these ceased too.

"We had both of us been more or less prepared for the captive's first effort, but not I for this. This extraordinary scrap of singing—but I'll come back to it. Bysshe gently unlocked and pushed open his bedroom door and we looked in. But we knew perfectly well what we should find. The room was undisturbed, and, except for its solitary inmate, vacant. There stood Bysshe's truckle bed, his old tallboy, his empty boots, his looking-glass. And there sat the bird, motionless, unabashed, clasping its perch with its lizard-skinned claws. Apart from a slight trembling of its breast-plumage, there was no symptom whatever of anything in the least unwonted. It sidled the fraction of an inch towards its master, its beak ajar showing the small clumsy tongue, its bead-like eye firmly settled on mine; and with a peculiar aversion I stared back.

"I stayed on with Bysshe for an hour or two, but though most of the time we sat in silence, like confederates awaiting their crucial moment, nothing happened. A sort of absentness, a slight frown, had settled on his face. And when at last I hurried off to keep some stupid appointment, I might have guessed it was not merely to hear a parrot *swear* that he had pressed me to come. Afterwards, he was less eager to share his enchantress."

"The voice, you mean?"

"Yes. Can you imagine the voice of the angel in the Leonardo Madonna?—Oh well, never mind that now. A few weeks afterwards Bysshe looked me up again, and for a while we talked aimlessly and at random. He was obviously waiting for me to question him.

" 'Oh, by the way, how much did you get?' I enquired at last. He looked absolutely dead beat, his skin was a kind of muddy gray. It appeared that the tiny *motif* of my experience had been a mere prelude. Bysshe, it seems had awakened a week or two after my visit in the very earliest of the morning, at the very moment when from underneath the parrot's pall had slipped solemnly out the complete aria. The words were not actually French, for he had detected something like 'alone' and 'grief.' But here and there they had a slight nasal timbre, and Bysshe, drinking the fatal music in, lying there in his striped pyjamas still a little dazed with sleep, had simply succumbed.

"He had succumbed to such a degree that his sole preposterous object in life now seemed to be that of tracing the bird's ownership. Not his sole object, rather; for at every return from this preposterous quest, he spent hours in solitude, bent on the equally vain aim of discovering which in the divine order of things had come first: the invective or the charm. He had some notion that it mattered.

"There is a bit, you remember, in one of Conrad's novels about a voice—Lena's. There is another bit in Shakespeare, and in Coleridge; in almost every poet, of course—but it doesn't matter. Four notes had been enough for me. And even if Melba in her dreams de-

lights the listening shades on the borders of Paradise—even *they* will not have heard the best that earth can do. You see there was nothing bird-like in the parrot's piece, except the purity. It was the voice of a seraph, the voice of a marvellous fiddle (that bit of solo, for example, in Mozart's Minuet in E flat). A voice innocent of the meaning—even of the degree—of its longing; innocent, I mean, of realising that life can't really stand—if it could comprehend it—anything so abjectly beautiful as all that; that there's a breaking-point.

"It's difficult even to suggest the effect. Absolutely the most beautiful thing in the world a cousin of mine once told me he had ever seen was from the top of a 'bus. He happened to glance into the dusk of an upper room through an open window, and a naked girl stood there, her eyes looking inward in a remote dream, her shift lifted a little above her small lovely head, as she was about to put it on. Well I suppose Bysshe's experience resembled that. But there; *I*, mind you, heard only four notes of it. And now there are no more to come. And my cousin, lost in stupefaction or remorse, had kept immovably to his 'bus."

Judy's sewing lay for a moment idle in her lap; her downcast eyes were fixed on it as if suddenly it had presented her with an insoluble problem.

"But there was, of course, quite another—a farcical—side to the comedy," Tressider pushed on. "Poor Bysshe's pursuit proved as ludicrous as it looks amusing. When you come to think of it, you know, we make our own idols. A silence, a still look of the eyes, a crammed instant of oblivion, and we are what's called 'in love.' What Stendhal calls crystallisation, doesn't he? Queer.

But it's the same in everything. Not merely sex, I mean. And that, I suppose, is what happened to Bysshe.

"Those slowish internal creatures crystallise hardest, perhaps. Out of this lost wandering voice he made—well, he embodied it. And the result wasn't in the least like poor Minnie. There was now particular tragedy in that. For Bysshe, that is. But, just like him, he tried, as I say, to track the embodiment down. And how could he tell which he'd unearth first—angel or devil. Or—both together. Think of that. Anyhow, he completely failed. First, of course, he returned to the dealer in live stock, who extorted from him a larger sum than he had paid for the parrot, as a bribe to disclose where it had come from. After which Bysshe had at once hied off to a corn-chandler's at Leytonstone—a talkative man.

"This man had bought the bird from a customer to whom he sold weekly supplies of chicken-food and canary-seed—a maiden lady in a semi-detached villa neatly matted with *ampelopsis Veitchi.*"

"How nice!" said Judy in a hushed little voice—as if absent-minded.

"Yes," said Tressider. "When Bysshe at last asked her outright if the bird had ever talked while it was in her possession, a pink flush had spread over her face. She had herself tried to teach it, she told him, looking down her nose the while beneath her large gold-rimmed glasses: just 'Scratch-a-poll' or something of that kind. But she had failed. A seafaring nephew had presented her with the bird—a nephew of some little naivety, I should imagine. He had, she fancied, 'picked it up' in Portsmouth.

" 'It talks a little *now,*' Bysshe had confided to her.

"And the lady had at once given her case away by retaliating that what it might do in the small hours, or with only a gentleman present, was no concern of hers.

"Then Bysshe asked if the parrot had ever engaged in song—'like a bullfinch, you know.' And the lady's expression implied that his question had confirmed her suspicions of his sanity.

"Portsmouth turned out another bad egg. He tracked down the shop, but the proprietor had died of dropsy a week before. Still, his daughter confessed that if the parrot *was* the parrot she had in mind—though she had never heard it talking in particular—then it may have been resident in the shop for something under a year. At this a ray of hope struck down on the squalid scene, and Bysshe enquired if the late proprietor had ever indulged in 'musical evenings.'

"There was a young lady living not many doors down the street, he was informed, who taught the pianoforte, and who led a Mixed Methodist Choir. Bysshe had accordingly spent the greater part of that evening beneath the young lady's lighted window—providentially an inch or two ajar—while in successive keys she practised her scales. And for *bonne bouche* she had at last rewarded the eavesdropper with a rendering of 'Hold the Fort'; but, alas, in tones of a pitch and volume which no mere mimic, feathered or otherwise, could hope to recapture.

"Bysshe could get no further for the present. As I say, he never did. His parrot's past had proved irrevocable. And apart from the hint of the prehistoric in all its species, even the age of this particular specimen remained a mystery. Destiny *may*, of course, have seduced it to that slum in Portsmouth from the Islands of the

Blest. That would, at any rate, account for the critical side of its repertory. It *may* have taken flight clean out of a fairy-tale, leaving its rarer colours behind it. So at least one can imagine Snow-white singing over her bed-making in the house of the dwarfs. It *may* have had Belial for owner and then St. Lucy; or *vice versa*. It may have been a fallen Parrot. But it doesn't matter.

"The only point worth bothering about is that Bysshe couldn't get its original out of his head—the original he had invented, I mean. Parrots don't learn to sing or to swear in an afternoon. Positive *months* of intercourse must have been necessary even for a fowl as intelligent as that. And so, poor Bysshe lived in constant torture. Where was she now—this impossible She? And where and whose the tongue that seemed to be vocal of the very rot to which all things living in this delightful world are —well—doomed, you know?

"Anyhow, Bysshe gave up the quest; and lived on in a furious, implacable dream. The one thing he couldn't do was to exorcise this ghost in him. He shut himself up in his chambers for days together, and the autumnal evenings rapidly lengthened. He existed in a condition of abject nausea of expectation; and in as abject a terror of having that expectation fulfilled. Nothing on earth would cajole or intimidate the bird, though Bysshe cursed it at one moment and at the next lavished upon it all the spices of the East. Cajoled it, I mean, to the extent of persuading it to embark on its programme unless the spirit moved it.

"It's an almost tragic thought too—for his loathing of the parrot now exceeded all bounds—that, far from returning these sentiments, the creature seemed to have

fallen head over ears in love with his keeper. It would squat on its perch, muttering inarticulate endearments, or, sidling stealthily with beak and claw from base to keystone of its dome-shaped cage, would ogle him with an eye as amorous and amiable as the dumb thing could make it. And only dumb things of course can ever really be in love. There's a genuine pathos there, though Bysshe was immune to it.

"And now, when the old black Stygian flood set in anew, the bird no longer swore *at* him; it swore with him. And it so dispersed its favours that Bysshe up to the very last was never able to settle with any certainty which part of its programme came first—the paradisal aria or the other. You couldn't anticipate the creature. It chose its own moments—and these invariably unexpected. When gigantic storm-clouds were heaping themselves above the hill of the Strand, out of that menacing hush its amazing incantation would steal upon the air. In the balmiest hours of St. Martin's summer, Bysshe would hurriedly spring to his windows to cut off the foul stream that came sliding out of that minute throat like the sluggish lees of a volcanic eruption.

"It was no good. You can't pin down human nature. Luckily Bysshe did not depend on his ship-broking. If he had, his parrot would have put him in the Workhouse. It's bad enough, so I am told, to fall in love with the tangible, with a creature owning a heart that you can at least believe in, or besiege, or at times hope to break. But to be infatuated by a second-hand voice and to share its decoy with the company of a friend possessing a tongue that might shock Beelzebub himself—well, that, I gather, is an even less pleasant experience."

Judy raised the hand that held her sewing, and gently rubbed her left cheek. The air was close in spite of the open window, and in spite of the cool-looking vaporous moonlight in which Stella continued to sit and soak. But neither seemed inclined to interrupt the interminable yarn. Indeed Tressider himself appeared to have grown a little tired of it. He half yawned.

"There was nothing, you know," he began again, with a more pronounced drawl in his voice; "there was nothing of course extremely exceptional in Bysshe's parrot's powers, except possibly the collusion. There are numbers of historical parrots with a comparable repertory. There was the parrot for example, perfectly well accredited, that could recite a whole sonnet of Petrarch's. There is the Grand Khan's notorious cockatoo—though that was made of metal and precious stones. In France there are parrots that can reel off pages at a time of the academic dictionary. And there was the macaw that Luther despatched with his translation of the Bible. I'll bet, too, Catherine Parr had a parrot—with a five-stringed lute. Whether or not; the rest is silence.

"Minnie Sturgess naturally enough, poor thing, had been restless for weeks. The game in which she had never held any really decent cards she now saw slipping into fatuity. Bysshe was possessed. The assurance of *that* poisoned the very air she breathed. But possessed by what? By whom? She played on for a while, none the less, with all the courage and the skill she could muster. Bysshe indeed was even taking a tonic of her prescription—some patent food or other, when I saw him again towards the end of October. It didn't appear to be doing him much good. Knowing as I did the cause

of this vacant somnambulism—that furtive vigilant stare of his as if from some living creature hiding far back in his eyes—the desperate change in his looks was almost ridiculous.

"'Why don't you drown the wretched thing?' I asked him. 'It's a machine—an automaton: and half-devilish at that.' But the face he lifted to me, its ears almost visibly pricked up towards the lair of his seducer, was —well, I suppose you know what unrequited passion can make of a man."

"You really mean," cried Judy suddenly, needle in the air, "you really mean he was wasting away for the ghost of a voice?"

Tressider looked at her across the room. Even a stranger would have noticed the peculiar stridency of her shocked tones. Its bells were out of tune. To judge from Tressider's face, the telling of his story had tired him a good deal.

"I mean," he said, "things do happen like that. Though no doubt, as with John Keats, some 'morbid affection' helped. What are we all but ghosts—of something? And who's telling this story for *you,* pray, but *your* ghost of *me?* All it comes to is that Bysshe kept on feeding his imagination, and the effort wore him down."

"'Morbid affection!'" echoed Stella. "Why drag in the mortuary?"

"And what," gasped Judy, "and what did Miss Sturgess do? Finally, I mean? And apart" (and she added the words almost with a touch of bravado) "apart from the patent food, or medicine, or whatever it was?"

"Miss Sturgess?" Tressider echoed. "She played her last card; and it was a poor card, played like that. You

see, poor thing, her only possible hope was to discover *somehow* exactly how she stood, since Bysshe had become little but a sullen recluse. She scarcely saw him now, even though so far as I can tell, there had been no open rift or quarrel between them. One may assume she had been awaiting her opportunity; and I'm not attacking her intentions. And one evening—and, mind you, as the colder weather approached, and possibly because Bysshe (though he lavished other kinds of dainties on his parrot) was incapable of showing it any *spiritual* sympathy, the creature was growing more and more stagnant and morose—well, one evening he had slipped out to fetch himself, I think, a bottle of wine. He was sinking into a sheer inertia—from being goaded on and on. And while on this errand he seems to have had some kind of fainting attack. Not the first of the kind. This had entailed his sitting for half an hour or so in the nearest pub; for in these later days of his obsession he had practically given up venturing further afield. All told, he couldn't have been more than an hour away.

"When he returned Minnie Sturgess was standing by the window in the farther corner of his room. There was still a trace of twilight in the sky and it illumined her set face near the glass. And something in that or in her attitude set him shivering. He asked her what was wrong; then noticed that her left hand was bound up, and very inadequately, with a handkerchief—one of his own.

"She merely turned her head—and a stony one it must have appeared, I should imagine—and looked at him. He managed to repeat his question. He asked her what was the matter. I gathered that she didn't say very much in reply, only something to the effect that in fu-

ture so far as she was concerned Bysshe was entirely at liberty to enjoy the delights of the company he had chosen, and which for some time past he had evidently preferred to hers. And that now at any rate he would no longer be taunted regarding it when it wasn't there. She had a raucous voice, and it was, I gathered, a bit of feminine sarcasm; something like that.

"And Bysshe knew pretty well what it meant. He knew that his voices, devilish and seraphic, were now for ever silent: that their murderess was there. He sat down without answering. Mad dogs' teeth are notoriously dangerous, Miss Sturgess went on to remark; did Bysshe know if parrots' were? And still, I gathered, he made no reply. He just sat there, paying no attention, as if almost he had taken lessons in endurance from his late pet.

"And then, his friend seems to have walked—or so at least I see her—in a kind of prowling semi-circle round him, with eyes fixed on his face, and so out of the door. And then down the echoing shallow wooden staircase, and into the cobbled courtyard, and under the thinning plane-tree, and out into London—*en route,* at last, poor soul, for the boarding-house in Ramsgate."

"And where did Bysshe bury the thing?" enquired Stella, as if sick to death of being satirical.

"I never asked him that," said Tressider calmly. "Nor, so far as I have heard, did he ever catechise the desolate one regarding which precise item of the two counts of the indictment had induced her to wring the parrot's neck. Probably the *bel canto,* for I don't believe myself that a woman much cares what company the man she is in love with keeps provided that it is not too good for *her.*"

At this, apparently, Judy had sat bolt upright in her chair, as if in sudden fear or anxiety. And at that precise moment heavyish footsteps were heard without.

"Hello," inquired a bass, unctuous, yet hardly good-humoured voice, "when shall you three meet again?"

It was Bill who stood in the doorway—Bill in his ineffable dinner-jacket and glossy shirt. And he all but filled it. He might almost have been a balloon, this Bill—tethered to the carpet there by his glossy patent-leather shoes—buoyant with gas.

"He has been telling us a story about a parrot," said Judy in a low voice, "who used very bad language."

"*Has* he?" said Bill. "Well, he ought to know better." But his eye was almost as vacant as that of Bysshe's pet. It wandered off to rest on Judy's other guest, Stella. "And what did *you* think of it?" he said; "the bad man's tale?"

"Why," said Stella, 'I am a little too grown-up for fairy-tales. And as for morals; I can find my own."

"And you, Badroulbadour?" said Bill, widely smiling at his wife.

"Me, Bill," echoed Judy firmly, her pretty cheeks flushed after her exertions. "Why, I have been thinking that the tiny creature who's going to wear this shirt has ventured into a rather difficult world."

"And who, may I ask, *is* the 'tiny creature'?" drawled her husband, almost as though such a question could be a sarcasm.

Tressider's gaze was fixed vacantly on the scrap of sewing. He appeared to be entirely aloof from this little domestic catechism—seemed to have lost interest in the evening.

"It's for Mollie's little boy. He was born about three days ago," Judy said.

But Stella, too, appeared to have lost interest. Though her face was in shadow, her eyes could still see the moon —a moon by its slightly cindrous light now betraying that it was soon to set. And to judge from her attitude and expression, this eventuality would bring her no regret, since, as it seemed in her darker moments, the moon of her own secret waters had long ago set for ever.

All Hallows

"And because time in itself . . . can receive no alteration, the hallowing . . . must consist in the shape or countenance which we put upon the affaires that are incident in these days."

RICHARD HOOKER.

IT was about half-past three on an August afternoon when I found myself for the first time looking down upon All Hallows. And at first glimpse of it, every vestige of fatigue and vexation passed away. I stood "at gaze," as the old phrase goes—like the two children of Israel sent in to spy out the Promised Land. How often the imagined transcends the real. Not so All Hallows. Having at last reached the end of my journey—flies, dust, heat, wind—having at last come limping out upon the green sea-bluff beneath which lay its walls—I confess the actuality excelled my feeble dreams of it.

What most astonished me, perhaps, was the sense not so much of its age, its austerity, or even its solitude, but its air of abandonment. It lay couched there as if in its narrow sea-bay. Not a sound was in the air; not a jackdaw clapped its wings among its turrets. No other roof, not even a chimney, was in sight; only the dark-blue arch of the sky; the narrow snowline of the ebbing

tide; and that gaunt coast fading away into the haze of a West over which were already gathering the veils of sunset.

We had met then, at an appropriate hour and season. And yet—I wonder. For it was certainly not the "beauty" of All Hallows, lulled as if into a dream in this serenity of air and heavens, which was to leave the sharpest impression upon me. And what kind of first showing would it have made, I speculated, if an autumnal gale had been shrilling and trumpeting across its narrow bay—clots of wind-borne spume floating among its dusky pinnacles—and the roar of the sea echoing against its walls! Imagine it frozen stark in winter, icy hoar-frost edging its every boss, moulding, finial, crocket, cusp!

Indeed, are there not works of man, legacies of a half-forgotten past, scattered across this human world of ours from China to Peru which seem to daunt the imagination with their incomprehensibility? Incomprehensible, I mean, in the sense that the passion that inspired and conceived them is incomprehensible. Viewed in the light of the passing day, they might be the monuments of a race of demi-gods. And yet, if we could but free ourselves from our timidities, realise, that even we ourselves have an obligation to leave behind us similar memorials—testaments to the creative and faithful genius not so much of the individual as of Humanity itself.

However that may be, it was my own personal fortune to see All Hallows for the first time in the heat of the Dog Days, after a journey which could hardly be justified except by its end. At this moment of the afternoon the great church almost cheated one into the belief that it was possessed of a life of its own. It lay, as I say,

couched in its natural hollow, basking under the dark dome of the heavens like some half-fossilised monster that might at any moment stir and awaken out of the swoon to which the wand of the enchanter had committed it. And with every inch of the sun's descending journey it changed its appearance.

That is the charm of such things. Man himself, says the philosopher, is the sport of change. His life and the life around him are but the flotsam of a perpetual flux. Yet, haunted by ideals, egged on by impossibilities, he builds his vision of the changeless; and time diversifies it with its colours and its "effects" at leisure. It was drawing near to harvest now; the summer was nearly over; the corn would soon be in stook; the season of silence had come, not even the robins had yet begun to practice their autumnal lament. I should have come earlier.

The distance was of little account. But nine flinty hills in seven miles is certainly hard commons. To plod (the occupant of a cloud of dust) up one steep incline and so see another; to plod up that and so see a third; to surmount that and, half-choked, half-roasted, to see (as if in unbelievable mirage) a fourth—and always stone walls, discoloured grass, no flower but ragged ragwort, whited fleabane, moody nettle, and the exquisite stubborn bindweed with its almond-burdened censers, and always the glitter and dazzle of the sun—well, the experience grows irksome. And then that endless flint erection with which some jealous Lord of the Manor had barricaded his verdurous estate! A fly-infested mile of the company of that wall was tantamount to making one's way into the infernal regions—with Tantalus for fellow-pilgrim. And when a solitary and empty dung-wagon had lum-

bered by, lifting the dumb dust out of the road in swirling clouds into the heat-quivering air, I had all but wept aloud.

No, I shall not easily forget that walk—or the conclusion of it—when footsore, all but dead beat—dust all over me, cheeks, lips, eyelids, in my hair, dust in drifts even between my naked body and my clothes—I stretched my aching limbs on the turf under the straggle of trees which crowned the bluff of that last hill still blessedly green and verdant, and feasted my eyes on the cathedral beneath me. How odd Memory is—in her sorting arrangements. How perverse her pigeon-holes.

It had reminded me of a drizzling evening many years ago. I had stayed a moment to listen to an old Salvation Army officer preaching at a street corner. The sopped and squalid houses echoed with his harangue. His penitents' drum resembled the block of an executioner. His goatish beard wagged at every word he uttered. "My brothers and sisters," he was saying, "the very instant our fleshly bodies are born they begin to perish; the moment the Lord has put them together, time begins to take them to pieces again. *Now* at this very instant if you listen close, you can hear the nibblings and frettings of the moth and rust within—the worm that never dies. It's the same with human causes and creeds and institutions—just the same. O then for that Strand of Beauty where all that is mortal shall be shed away and we shall appear in the likeness and verisimilitude of what in sober and awful truth we are."

The light striking out of an oil and colourman's shop at the street corner lay across his cheek and beard and glassed his eye. The soaked circle of humanity in which

he was gesticulating stood staring and motionless—the lassies, the probationers, the melancholy idlers. I had had enough. I went away. But it is odd that so utterly inappropriate a recollection should have edged back into my mind at this moment. There was, as I have said, not a living soul in sight. Only a few sea-birds—oyster catchers maybe—were jangling on the distant beach.

It was now a quarter to four by my watch, and the usual pensive "lin-lan-lone" from the belfry beneath me would soon no doubt be ringing to evensong. But if at that moment a triple bob-major had suddenly clanged its alarm over sea and shore, I couldn't have stirred a finger's breadth. Scanty though the shade afforded by the wind-shorn tuft of trees under which I lay might be—I was ineffably at peace.

No bell, as a matter of fact, loosed its tongue that stagnant half-hour. Unless then the walls beneath me already concealed a few such chance visitors as myself, All Hallows would be empty. A cathedral not only without a close but without a congregation—yet another romantic charm. The Deanery and the residences of its clergy, my old guide-book had long since informed me, were a full mile or more away. I determined in due time, first to make sure of an entry, and then having quenched my thirst, to bathe.

How inhuman any extremity—hunger, fatigue, pain, desire—makes us poor humans. Thirst and drought so haunted my mind that again and again as I glanced towards it I supped up at one long draught that complete blue sea. But meanwhile, too, my eyes had been steadily exploring and searching out this monument of the bygone centuries beneath me.

The headland faced approximately due west. The windows of the Lady Chapel therefore lay immediately beneath me, their fourteenth-century glass showing flatly dark amid their traceries. Above it, the shallow V-shaped, leaden-ribbed roof of the chancel converged towards the unfinished tower, then broke away at right angles—for the cathedral was cruciform. Walls so ancient and so sparsely adorned and decorated could not but be inhospitable in effect. Their stone was of a bleached bone-grey; a grey that none the less seemed to be as immaterial as flame—or incandescent ash. They were substantial enough, however, to cast a marvellously lucent shadow, of a blue no less vivid but paler than that of the sea, on the shelving sward beneath them. And that shadow was steadily shifting as I watched. But even if the complete edifice had vanished into the void, the scene would still have been of an incredible loveliness. The colours in air and sky on this dangerous coast seemed to shed a peculiar unreality even on the rocks of its own outworks.

So, from my vantage place on the hill that dominates it, I continued for a while to watch All Hallows; to spy upon it; and no less intently than a sentry who, not quite trusting his own eyes, has seen a dubious shape approaching him in the dusk. It may sound absurd, but I felt that at any moment I too might surprise All Hallows in the act of revealing what in very truth it looked like—and *was,* when no human witness was there to share its solitude.

Those gigantic statues, for example, which flanked the base of the unfinished tower—an intense bluish-white in the sunlight and a bluish-purple in shadow—images of

angels and of saints, as I had learned of old from my guide-book. Only six of them at most could be visible, of course, from where I sat. And yet I found myself counting them again and yet again, as if doubting my own arithmetic. For my first impression had been that seven were in view—though the figure furthest from me at the western angle showed little more than a jutting fragment of stone which might perhaps be only part and parcel of the fabric itself.

But then the lights even of day may be deceitful, and fantasy plays strange tricks with one's eyes. With exercise, none the less, the mind is enabled to detect minute details which the unaided eye is incapable of particularising. Given the imagination, man himself indeed may some day be able to distinguish what shapes are walking during our own terrestrial midnight amid the black shadows of the craters in the noonday of the moon. At any rate, I could trace at last frets of carving, minute weather marks, crookednesses, incrustations, repairings, that had before passed unnoticed. These walls, indeed, like human faces, were maps and charts of their own long past.

In the midst of this prolonged scrutiny, the hypnotic air, the heat, must suddenly have overcome me. I fell asleep up there in my grove's scanty shade; and remained asleep, too, long enough (as time is measured by the clocks of sleep), to dream an immense panoramic dream. On waking, I could recall only the faintest vestiges of it, and found that the hand of my watch had crept on but a few minutes in the interval. It was eight minutes past four.

I scrambled up—numbed and inert—with that peculiar sense of panic which sometimes follows an uneasy sleep.

What folly to have been frittering time away within sight of my goal at an hour when no doubt the cathedral would soon be closed to visitors, and abandoned for the night to its own secret ruminations. I hastened down the steep rounded incline of the hill, and having skirted under the sunlit expanse of the walls, came presently to the south door, only to discover that my forebodings had been justified, and that it was already barred and bolted. The discovery seemed to increase my fatigue fourfold. How foolish it is to obey mere caprices. What a straw is a man!

I glanced up into the beautiful shell of masonry above my head. Shapes and figures in stone it showed in plenty —symbols of an imagination that had flamed and faded, leaving this signature for sole witness—but not a living bird or butterfly. There was but one faint chance left of making an entry. Hunted now, rather than the hunter, I hastened out again into the full blazing flood of sunshine—and once more came within sight of the sea; a sea so near at last that I could hear its enormous sallies and murmurings. Indeed I had not realised until that moment how closely the great western doors of the cathedral abutted on the beach.

It was as if its hospitality had been deliberately designed, not for a people to whom the faith of which it was the shrine had become a weariness and a commonplace, but for the solace of pilgrims from over the ocean. I could see them tumbling into their cockle-boats out of their great hollow ships—sails idle, anchors down; see them leaping ashore and straggling up across the sands to these all-welcoming portals—"Parthians and Medes and Elamites; dwellers in Mesopotamia and in the parts of Egypt about Cyrene; strangers of Rome, Jews and Prose-

lytes—we do hear them speak in our own tongue the wonderful works of God."

And so at last I found my way into All Hallows—entering by a rounded dwarfish side-door with zigzag mouldings. There hung for corbel to its dripstone a curious leering face, with its forked tongue out, to give me welcome. And an appropriate one, too, for the figure I made!

But once beneath that prodigious roof-tree, I forgot myself and everything that was mine. The hush, the coolness, the unfathomable twilight drifted in on my small human consciousness. Not even the ocean itself is able so completely to receive one into its solacing bosom. Except for the windows over my head, filtering with their stained glass the last western radiance of the sun, there was but little visible colour in those great spaces, and a severe economy of decoration. The stone piers carried their round arches with an almost intimidating impassivity.

By deliberate design, too, or by some illusion of perspective, the whole floor of the building appeared steadily to ascend towards the east, where a dark wooden multitudinously-figured rood-screen shut off the choir and the high altar from the nave. I seemed to have exchanged one universal actuality for another: the burning world of nature, for this oasis of quiet. Here, the wings of the imagination need never rest in their flight out of the wilderness into the unknown.

Thus resting, I must again have fallen asleep. And so swiftly can even the merest freshet of sleep affect the mind, that when my eyes opened, I was completely at a loss.

Where was I? What demon of what romantic chasm had swept my poor drowsy body into this immense haunt? The din and clamour of an horrific dream whose fainting rumour was still in my ear, became suddenly stilled. Then at one and the same moment, a sense of utter dismay at earthly surroundings no longer serene and peaceful, but grim and forbidding, flooded my mind, and I became aware that I was no longer alone. Twenty or thirty paces away, and a little this side of the rood-screen, an old man was standing.

To judge from the black and purple velvet and tassel-tagged gown he wore, he was a verger. He had not yet realised, it seemed, that a visitor shared his solitude. And yet he was listening. His head was craned forward and leaned sideways on his rusty shoulders. As I steadily watched him, he raised his eyes, and with a peculiar stealthy deliberation scanned the complete upper regions of the northern transept. Not the faintest rumour of any sound that may have attracted his attention reached me where I sat. Maybe a wild bird had made its entry through a broken pane of glass and with its cry had at the same moment awakened me and caught his attention. Or maybe the old man was waiting for some fellow-occupant to join him from above.

I continued to watch him. Even at this distance, the silvery twilight cast by the clere-story windows was sufficient to show me, though vaguely, his face: the high sloping nose, the lean cheekbones and protruding chin. He continued so long in the same position that I at last determined to break in on his reverie.

At sound of my footsteps his head sunk cautiously back upon his shoulders; and he turned; and then motionlessly

surveyed me as I drew near. He resembled one of those old men whom Rembrandt delighted in drawing: the knotted hands, the blank drooping eyebrows, the wide thin-lipped ecclesiastical mouth, the intent cavernous dark eyes beneath the heavy folds of their lids. White as a miller with dust, hot and draggled, I was hardly the kind of visitor that any self-respecting custodian would warmly welcome, but he greeted me none the less with every mark of courtesy.

I apologised for the lateness of my arrival, and explained it as best I could. "Until I caught sight of you," I concluded lamely, "I hadn't ventured very far in: otherwise I might have found myself a prisoner for the night. It must be dark in here when there is no moon."

The old man smiled—but wryly. "As a matter of fact, sir," he replied, "the cathedral is closed to visitors at four—at such times, that is, when there is no afternoon service. Services are not as frequent as they were. But visitors are rare too. In winter, in particular, you notice the gloom—as you say, sir. Not that I ever spend the night here: though I am usually last to leave. There's the risk of fire to be thought of and . . . I think I should have detected your presence here, sir. One becomes accustomed after many years."

There was the usual trace of official pedantry in his voice, but it was more pleasing than otherwise. Nor did he show any wish to be rid of me. He continued his survey, although his eye was a little absent and his attention seemed to be divided.

"I thought perhaps I might be able to find a room for the night and really explore the cathedral to-morrow morning. It has been a tiring journey; I come from B——"

"Ah, from B——; it *is* a fatiguing journey, sir, taken on foot. I used to walk in there to see a sick daughter of mine. Carriage parties occasionally make their way here, but not so much as once. We are too far out of the hurly-burly to be much intruded on. Not that them who come to make their worship here are intruders. Far from it. But most that come are mere sightseers. And the fewer of them, I say, in the circumstances, the better."

Something in what I had said or in my appearance seemed to have reassured him. "Well, I cannot claim to be a regular churchgoer," I said. "I am myself a mere sightseer. And yet—even to sit here for a few minutes is to be reconciled."

"Ah, reconciled, sir," the old man repeated, turning away. "I can well imagine it after that journey on such a day as this. But to live here is another matter."

"I was thinking of that," I replied in a foolish attempt to retrieve the position. "It must, as you say, be desolate enough in the winter—for two-thirds of the year, indeed."

"We have our storms, sir—the bad with the good," he agreed, "and our position is specially prolific of what they call sea-fog. It comes driving in from the sea for days and nights together—gale and mist, so that you can scarcely see your open hand in front of your eyes even in broad daylight. And the noise of it, sir, sweeping across overhead in that wooliness of mist, if you take me, is most peculiar. It's shocking to a stranger. No, sir, we are left pretty much to ourselves when the fine weather birds are flown. . . . You'd be astonished at the power of the winds here. There was a mason—a local man too—

not above two or three years ago was blown clean off the roof from under the tower—tossed up in the air like an empty sack. But"—and the old man at last allowed his eyes to stray upwards to the roof again—"but there's not much doing now." He seemed to be pondering. "Nothing open."

"I mustn't detain you," I said, "but you were saying that services are infrequent now. Why is that? When one thinks of——" But tact restrained me.

"Pray don't think of keeping me, sir. It's a part of my duties. But from a remark you let fall I was supposing you may have seen something that appeared, I understand, not many months ago in the newspapers. We lost our Dean—Dean Pomfrey—last November. To all intents and purposes, I mean; and his office has not yet been filled. Between you and me, sir, there's a hitch —though I should wish it to go no further. They are greedy monsters—those newspapers: no respect, no discretion, no decency, in my view. And they copy each other like cats in a chorus.

"We have never wanted to be a notoriety here, sir: and not of late things of all times. We must face our own troubles. You'd be astonished how callous the mere sightseer can be. And not only them from over the water whom our particular troubles cannot concern—but far worse—parties as English as you or me. They ask you questions you wouldn't believe possible in a civilized country. Not that they care what becomes of us—not one iota, sir. We talk of them masked-up Inquisitors in olden times, but there's many a human being in our own would enjoy seeing a fellow-creature on the rack if he could get the opportunity. It's a heartless age, sir."

This was queerish talk in the circumstances: and after all I myself was of the glorious company of the sight-seers. I held my peace. And the old man, as if to make amends, asked me if I would care to see any particular part of the building. "The light is smalling," he explained, "but still if we keep to the ground level there'll be a few minutes to spare; and we shall not be interrupted if we go quietly on our way."

For the moment the reference eluded me: I could only thank him for the suggestion and once more beg him not to put himself to any inconvenience. I explained, too, that though I had no personal acquaintance with Dr. Pomfrey, I had read of his illness in the newspapers. "Isn't he," I added a little dubiously, "the author of *The Church and the Folk?* If so, he must be an exceedingly learned and delightful man."

"Ay, sir." The old verger put up a hand towards me; "you may well say it: a saint, if ever there was one. But it's worse than illness, sir—it's oblivion. And, thank God, the newspapers didn't get hold of more than a bare outline."

He dropped his voice. "This way, if you please;" and he led me off gently down the aisle, once more coming to a standstill beneath the roof of the tower. "What I mean, sir, is that there's very few left in this world who have any place in their minds for a sacred confidence—no reverence, sir. They would as lief All Hallows and all it stands for were swept away to-morrow, demolished to the dust. And that gives me the greatest caution with whom I speak. But sharing one's troubles is sometimes a relief. If it weren't so, why do those Cartholics have their wooden boxes all built for the purpose? What else,

I ask you, is the meaning of their fasts and penances?

"You see, sir, I am myself, and have been for upwards of twelve years now, the Dean's verger. In the sight of no respecter of persons—of offices and dignities, that is, I take it—I might claim to be even an elder brother. And our Dean, sir, was a man who was all things to all men. No pride of place, no vauntingness, none of your apron-and-gaiter high-and-mightiness whatsoever, sir. And then that! And to come on us without warning; or at least without warning as could be taken as *such.*" I followed his eyes into the darkening stony spaces above us; a light like tarnished silver lay over the soundless vaultings. But so, of course, dusk, either of evening or day-break, would affect the ancient stones. Nothing moved there.

"You must understand, sir," the old man was continuing, "the procession for divine service proceeds from the vestry over yonder out through those wrought-iron gates and so under the rood-screen and into the chancel there. Visitors are admitted on showing a card or a word to the verger in charge: but not otherwise. If you stand a pace or two to the right, you will catch a glimpse of the altar-screen—fourteenth-century work, Bishop Robert de Beaufort—and a unique example of the age. But what I was saying is that when we proceed for the services *out* of here *into* there, it has always been our custom to keep pretty close together; more seemly and decent, sir, than straggling in like so many sheep.

"Besides, sir, aren't we at such times in the manner of an *array;* 'marching as to war,' if you take me: it's a lesson in objects. The third verger leading: then the choris-

ters, boys and men, though sadly depleted; then the minor canons; then any other dignitaries who may happen to be present, with the canon in residence; then myself, sir, followed by the Dean.

"There hadn't been much amiss up to then, and on that afternoon, I can vouch—and I've repeated it *ad naushum*—there was not a single stranger out in this beyond here, sir—nave or transepts. Not within view, that is: one can't be expected to see through four feet of Norman stone. Well, sir, we had gone on our way, and I had actually turned about as usual to bow Dr. Pomfrey into his stall, when I found to my consternation, to my consternation, I say, he wasn't there! It alarmed me, sir, and as you might well believe if you knew the full circumstances.

"Not that I lost my presence of mind. My first duty was to see all things to be in order and nothing unseemly to occur. My feelings were another matter. The old gentleman had left the vestry with us: that I knew: I had myself robed 'im as usual, and he in his own manner, smiling with his 'Well, Jones, another day gone; another day gone.' He was always an anxious gentleman for *time*, sir. How we spend it, and all.

"As I say, then, he was behind me when we swept out of the gates. I saw him coming on out of the tail of my eye—we grow accustomed to it, to see with the whole of the eye, I mean. And then—not a vestige; and me—well, sir, nonplussed, as you may imagine. I gave a look and sign at Canon Ockham, and the service proceeded as usual, while I hurried back to the vestry thinking the poor gentleman must have been taken suddenly ill. And

yet, sir, I was not surprised to find the vestry vacant, and him not there. I had been expecting matters to come to what you might call a head.

"As best I could I held my tongue, and a fortunate thing it was that Canon Ockham was then in residence, and not Canon Leigh Shougar, though perhaps I am not the one to say it. No, sir, our beloved Dean—as pious and harmless a gentleman as ever graced the Church—was gone for ever. He was not to appear in our midst again. He had been"—and the old man with elevated eyebrows and long lean mouth nearly whispered the words into my ear—"he had been absconded—abducted, sir."

"Abducted!" I murmured.

The old man closed his eyes, and with trembling lids added, "He was found, sir, late that night up there in what they call the Trophy Room—sitting in a corner there, weeping. A child. Not a word of what had persuaded him to go or misled him there, not a word of sorrow or sadness, thank God. He didn't know us, sir—didn't know *me*. Just simple; harmless; memory all gone. Simple, sir."

It was foolish to be whispering together like this beneath these enormous spaces with not so much as a clothes-moth for sign of life within view. But I even lowered my voice still further: "Were there no premonitory symptoms? Had he been failing for long?"

The spectacle of grief in any human face is afflicting, but in a face as aged and resigned as this old man's—I turned away in remorse the moment the question was out of my lips; emotion of any kind is a human solvent and a sort of friendliness had sprung up between us.

"If you will just follow me," he whispered, "there's

a little place where I make my ablutions that might be of service, sir. We could converse there in better comfort. I am sometimes reminded of those words in Ecclesiastes: 'And a bird of the air shall tell of the matter.' There is not much in our poor human affairs, sir, that was not known to the writer of that book."

He turned and led the way with surprising celerity, gliding along in his thin-soled, square-toed, clerical springside boots and came to a pause outside a nail-studded door. He opened it with a huge key, and admitted me into a recess under the central tower. We mounted a spiral stone staircase and passed along a corridor hardly more than two feet wide and so dark that now and again I thrust out my fingertips in search of his black velveted gown to make sure of my guide.

This corridor at length conducted us into a little room whose only illumination I gathered was that of the ebbing dusk from within the cathedral. The old man with trembling rheumatic fingers lit a candle, and thrusting its stick into the middle of an old oak table, pushed open yet another thick oaken door. "You will find a basin and a towel in there, sir, if you will be so kind."

I entered. A print of the Crucifixion was tin-tacked to the panelled wall, and beneath it stood a tin basin and jug on a stand. Never was water sweeter. I laved my face and hands, and drank deep; my throat like a parched river-course after a drought. What appeared to be a tarnished censer lay in one corner of the room; a pair of seven-branched candlesticks shared a recess with a mouse-trap and a book. My eyes passed wearily yet gratefully from one to another of these mute discarded objects while I stood drying my hands.

When I returned, the old man was standing motionless before the spike-barred grill of the window, peering out and down.

"You asked me, sir," he said, turning his lank waxen face into the feeble rays of the candle, "you asked me, sir, a question which, if I understood you aright was this: Was there anything that had occurred *previous* that would explain what I have been telling you? Well, sir, it's a long story, and one best restricted to them perhaps that have the goodwill of things at heart. All Hallows, I might say, sir, is my second home. I have been here, boy and man, for close on fifty-five years—have seen four bishops pass away and have served under no less than five several deans, Dr. Pomfrey, poor gentleman, being the last of the five.

"If such a word could be excused, sir, it's no exaggeration to say that Canon Leigh Shougar is a greenhorn by comparison: which may in part be why he has never quite hit it off, as they say, with Canon Ockham. Or even with Archdeacon Trafford, though he's another kind of gentleman altogether. And *he* is at present abroad. He had what they call a breakdown in health, sir.

"Now in my humble opinion, what was required was not only wisdom and knowledge but simple common sense. In the circumstances I am about to mention, it serves no purpose for any of us to be talking too much; to be for ever sitting at a table with shut doors and finger on lip, and discussing what to most intents and purposes would hardly be called evidence at all, sir. What is the use of argufying, splitting hairs, objurgating about trifles, when matters are sweeping rapidly on from bad to worse. I say it with all due respect and not, I hope, thrusting my-

self into what doesn't concern me: Dr. Pomfrey might be with us now in his own self and reason if only common caution had been observed.

"But now that the poor gentleman is gone beyond all that, there is no hope of action or agreement left, none whatsoever. They meet and they meet, and they have now one expert now another down from London, and even from the continent. And I don't say they are not knowledgable gentlemen either, nor a pride to their profession. But why not tell *all?* Why keep back the very secret of what we know? That's what I am asking. And, what's the answer? Why simply that what they don't want to believe, what runs counter to their hopes and wishes and credibilities—and comfort—in this world, that's what they keep out of sight as long as decency permits.

"Canon Leigh Shougar *knows,* sir, what *I* know. And how, I ask, is he going to get to grips with it at this late day if he refuses to acknowledge that such things are what every fragment of evidence goes to prove that they are. It's *we,* sir, and not the rest of the heedless world outside, who in the long and the short of it are responsible. And what I say is: no power or principality here or hereunder can take possession of a place while those inside have faith enough to keep them out. But once let that falter—the seas are in. And when I say no power, sir, I mean—with all deference—even Satan himself." The lean lank face had set at the word like a wax mask. The black eyes beneath the heavy lids were fixed on mine with an acute intensity and—though more inscrutable things haunted them—with an unfaltering courage. So dense a hush hung about us that the very stones of the

walls seemed to be of silence solidified. It is curious what a refreshment of spirit a mere tin basinful of water may be. I stood leaning against the edge of the table so that the candlelight still rested on my companion.

"What is *wrong* here?" I asked him baldly.

He seemed not to have expected so direct an enquiry. "Wrong, sir? Why, if I might make so bold," he replied with a wan, far-away smile and gently drawing his hand down one of the velvet lapels of his gown, "if I might make so bold, sir, I take it that you have come as a direct answer to prayer."

His voice faltered. "I am an old man now, and nearly at the end of my tether. You must realise, if you please, that I can't get any help that I can understand. I am not doubting that the gentlemen I have mentioned have only the salvation of the cathedral at heart—the cause, sir; and a graver responsibility yet. But they refuse to see how close to the edge of things we are: and how we are drifting.

"Take mere situation. So far as my knowledge tells me, there is no sacred edifice in the whole kingdom—of a piece, that is, with All Hallows not only in mere size and age but in what I might call sanctity and tradition—that is so open—open, I mean, sir, to attack of this peculiar and terrifying nature."

"Terrifying?"

"*Terrifying,* sir; though I hold fast to what wits my Maker has bestowed on me. Where else, may I ask, would you expect the powers of darkness to congregate in open besiegement than in this narrow valley? First, the sea out there. Are you aware, sir, that ever since living remembrance flood-tide has been gnawing and mumbling

its way into this bay to the extent of three or four feet *per annum?* Forty inches, and forty inches, and forty inches corroding on and on: Watch it, sir, man and boy as I have these sixty years past and then make a century of it.

"And now, think a moment of the floods and gales that fall upon us autumn and winter through and even in spring, when this valley is liker paradise to young eyes than any place on earth. They make the roads from the nearest towns wellnigh impassable; which means that for seven months of the year we are to all intents and purposes clean cut off from the rest of the world—as the Schindels out there are from the mainland. Are you aware, sir, I continue, that as we stand now we are above a mile from traces of the nearest human habitation, and them merely the relics of a burnt-out old farmstead? I warrant that if (and which God forbid) you had been shut up here during the coming night, and it was a near thing but what you weren't—I warrant you might have shouted yourself dumb out of the nearest window if window you could reach—and not a human soul to heed or help you."

I shifted my hands on the table. It was tedious to be asking questions that received only such vague and evasive replies: and it is always a little disconcerting in the presence of a stranger to be spoken to so close, and with such positiveness.

"Well," I smiled, "I hope I should not have disgraced my nerves to such an extreme as that. As a small boy, one of my particular fancies was to spend a night in a pulpit. There's a cushion, you know!"

The old man's solemn glance never swerved from my

eyes. "But I take it, sir," he said, "if you had ventured to give out a text up there in the dark hours, your innocent young mind would not have been prepared for any kind of a congregation?"

"You mean," I said a little sharply, "that the place is haunted?" The absurd notion had flitted across my mind of some wandering tribe of gipsies chancing on a refuge so ample and isolated as this, and taking up its quarters in its secret parts. The old church must be honeycombed with corridors and passages and chambers pretty much like the one in which we were now concealed: and what does "cartholic" imply but an infinite hospitality within prescribed limits? But the old man had taken me at my word.

"I mean, sir," he said firmly, shutting his eyes, "that there are devilish agencies at work here." He raised his hand. "Don't, I entreat you, dismiss what I am saying as the wanderings of a foolish old man." He drew a little nearer. "I have heard them with these ears; I have seen them with these eyes; though whether they have any positive substance, sir, is beyond my small knowledge to declare. But what indeed might we expect their substance to *be?* First: I 'take it,' says the Book, 'to be such as no man can by learning define, nor by wisdom search out.' Is that so? Then I go by the Book. And next: what does the same Word or very near it (I speak of the Apochrypha) say of their *purpose?* It says—and correct me if I go astray—'Devils are creatures made by God, and *that for vengeance.*'

"So far, so good, sir. We stop when we can go no further. Vengeance. But of their power, of what they can *do,* I can give you definite evidences. It would be

a byword if once the rumour was spread abroad. And if it is *not* so, why, I ask, does every expert that comes here leave us in haste and in dismay? They go off with their tails between their legs. They see, they grope in, but they don't believe. They *invent* reasons. And they *hasten* to leave us!" His face shook with the emphasis he laid upon the word. "Why? Why, because the experience is beyond their knowledge, sir." He drew back breathless and, as I could see, profoundly moved.

"But surely," I said, "every old building is bound in time to show symptoms of decay. Half the cathedrals in England, half its churches, even, of any age, have been 'restored'—and in many cases with ghastly results. This new grouting and so on. Why, only the other day . . . All I mean is, why should you suppose mere wear and tear should be caused by any other agency than——"

The old man turned away. "I must apologise," he interrupted me with his inimitable admixture of modesty and dignity, "I am a poor mouth at explanations, sir. Decay —stress—strain—settling—dissolution: I have heard those words bandied from lip to lip like a game at cup and ball. They fill me with nausea. Why, I am speaking not of dissolution, sir, but of *repairs, restorations.* Not decay, *strengthening.* Not a corroding loss, an awful *progress.* I could show you places—and chiefly obscured from direct view and difficult of a close examination, sir, where stones lately as rotten as pumice and as fretted as a sponge have been replaced by others fresh-quarried—and nothing of their kind within twenty miles.

"There are spots where massive blocks a yard or more square have been *pushed* into place by sheer force. All Hallows is safer at this moment than it has been for three

hundred years. They meant well—them who came to see, full of talk and fine language, and went dumb away. I grant you they meant well. I allow that. They hummed and they hawed. They smirked this and they shrugged that. But at heart, sir, they were cowed—horrified: all at a loss. Their very faces showed it. But if you ask me for what purpose such doings are afoot—I have no answer; none.

"But now, supposing you yourself, sir, were one of them, with *your* repute at stake, and you were called in to look at a house which the owners of it and them who had it in trust were disturbed by its being re-edificated and restored by some agency unknown to them. Supposing that! *Why,*" and he rapped with his knuckles on the table, "being human *and not one of us* mightn't you be going away too with mouth shut, because you didn't want to get talked about to your disadvantage? And wouldn't you at last dismiss the whole thing as a foolish delusion, in the belief that living in out-of-the-way parts like these cuts a man off from the world, breeds maggots in the mind?

"I assure you, sir, they don't—not even Canon Ockham himself to the full—they don't believe even me. And yet, when they have their meetings of the Chapter, they talk and wrangle round and round about nothing else. I can bear the other without a murmur. What God sends, I say, we humans deserve. We have laid ourselves open to it. But when you buttress up blindness and wickedness with downright folly, why then, sir, I sometimes fear for my own reason."

He set his shoulders as square as his aged frame would permit, and with fingers clutching the lapels beneath his

chin, he stood gazing out into the darkness through that narrow inward window.

"Ah, sir," he began again, "I have not spent sixty years in this solitary place without paying heed to my own small wandering thoughts and instincts. Look at your newspapers, sir. What they call the Great War is over—and he'd be a brave man who would take an oath before heaven that *that* was only of human designing—and yet what do we see around us? Nothing but strife and juggleries and hatred and contempt and discord wherever you look. I am no scholar, sir, but so far as my knowledge and experience carry me, we human beings are living to-day what ought to have been done yesterday, and yet are at a loss to know what's to be done to-morrow.

"And the Church, sir. God forbid I should push my way into what does not concern me; and if you had told me half an hour gone by that you were a regular churchman, I shouldn't be pouring out all this to you now. It wouldn't be seemly. But being not so gives me confidence. By merely listening you can help me, sir; though you can't help *us*. Centuries ago—and in my humble judgment, rightly—we broke away from the parent stem and rooted ourselves in our own soil. But, right or wrong, doesn't that of itself, I ask you, make us all the more open to attack from him who never wearies in going to and fro in the world seeking whom he may devour?

"I am not wishing you to take sides. But a gentleman doesn't scoff; you don't find him jeering at what he doesn't rightly understand. He keeps his own counsel, sir. And that's where, as I say, Canon Leigh Shougar sets me doubting. He refuses to make allowances; though up there in London things may look different. He gets his

company there; and then for him the whole kallyidoscope changes, if you take me."

The old man scanned me an instant as if enquiring within himself whether, after all, I too might not be one of the outcasts. "You see, sir," he went on dejectedly, "I can bear what may be to come. I can, if need be, live on through what few years may yet remain to me and keep going, as they say. But only if I can be assured that my own inmost senses are not cheating and misleading me. Tell me the worst, and you will have done an old man a service he can never repay. Tell me, on the other hand, that I am merely groping along in a network of devilish *delusion,* sir—well, in that case I hope to be with my master, with Dr. Pomfrey, as soon as possible. We were all children once; and now there's nothing worse in this world for him to come into, in a manner of speaking.

"Oh, sir, I sometimes wonder if what we call childhood and growing up isn't a copy of the fate of our ancient forefathers. In the beginning of time there were Fallen Angels, we are told; but even if it weren't there in Holy Writ, we might have learnt it of our own fears and misgivings. I sometimes find myself looking at a young child with little short of awe, sir, knowing that within its mind is a scene of peace and paradise of which we older folk have no notion, and which will fade away out of it, as life wears in, like the mere tabernacling of a dream."

There was no trace of unction in his speech, though the phraseology might suggest it, and he smiled at me as if in reassurance. "You see, sir—if I have any true no-

tion of the matter—then I say, heaven is dealing very gently with Dr. Pomfrey. He has gone back, and, I take it, his soul is elsewhere and at rest."

He had come a pace or two nearer, and the candlelight now cast grotesque shadows in the hollows of his brows and cheekbones, silvering his long scanty hair. The eyes, dimming with age, were fixed on mine as if in incommunicable entreaty. I was at a loss to answer him.

He dropped his hands to his sides. "The fact is," he looked cautiously about him, "what I am now being so bold as to suggest, though it's a familiar enough experience to me, may put you in actual physical danger. But then, duty's duty, and a deed of kindness from stranger to stranger quite another matter. You seem to have come, if I may say so, in the nick of time: that was all. On the other hand we can leave the building at once if you are so minded. In any case we must be gone well before dark sets in; even mere human beings are best not disturbed at any night work they may be after. The dark brings recklessness: conscience cannot see as clear in the dark. Besides, I once delayed too long myself. There is not much of day left even now, though I see by the almanac there should be a slip of moon to-night—unless the sky is overclouded. All that I'm meaning is that our all-in-all, so to speak, is the calm untrammelled evidence of the outer senses, sir. And there comes a time when—well when one hesitates to trust one's own."

I have read somewhere that it is only its setting—the shape, the line, the fold, the angle of the lid and so on—that gives its finer shades of meaning and significance to the human eye. Looking into his, even in that narrow

and melancholy illumination, was like pondering over a gray, salt, desolate pool—such as sometimes neighbours the sea on a flat and dangerous coast.

Perhaps if I had been a little less credulous, or less exhausted, I should by now have begun to doubt this old creature's sanity. And yet, surely, at even the faintest contact with the insane, a sentinel in the mind sends up flares and warnings; the very landscape changes; there is a sense of insecurity. If, too, the characters inscribed by age and experience on a man's face can be evidence of goodness and simplicity, then my companion was safe enough. To trust in his sagacity was another matter.

But then, there was All Hallows itself to take into account. That first glimpse from my green headland of its louring yet lovely walls had been strangely moving. There are buildings (almost as though they were once copies of originals now half-forgotten in the human mind) that have a singular influence on the imagination. Even now in this remote candlelit room, immured between its massive stones, the vast edifice seemed to be gently and furtively fretting its impression on my mind.

I glanced again at the old man: he had turned aside as if to leave me, unbiased, to my own decision. How would a lifetime spent between these sombre walls have affected *me,* I wondered? Surely it would be an act of mere decency to indulge their worn-out hermit! He had appealed to me. If I were ten times more reluctant to follow him, I could hardly refuse. Not at any rate without risking a retreat as humiliating as that of the architectural experts he had referred to—with my tail between my legs.

"I only wish I could hope to be of any real help."

He turned about; his expression changed, as if at the coming of a light. "Why, then, sir, let us be gone at once. You are with me, sir: that was all I hoped and asked. And now there's no time to waste."

He tilted his head to listen a moment—with that large, flat, shell-like ear of his which age alone seems to produce. "Matches and candle, sir," he had lowered his voice to a whisper, "but—though we mustn't lose each other; you and me, I mean—*not,* I think, a naked light. What I would suggest, if you have no objection, is your kindly grasping my gown. There is a kind of streamer here, you see—as if made for the purpose. There will be a good deal of up-and-downing, but I know the building blindfold and as you might say inch by inch. And now that the bell-ringers have given up ringing it is more in my charge than ever."

He stood back and looked at me with folded hands, a whimsical childlike smile on his aged face. "I sometimes think to myself I'm like the sentry, sir, in that play of William Shakespeare's. I saw it, sir, years ago, on my only visit to London—when I was a boy. If ever there was a villain for all his fine talk and all, commend me to that ghost. I see him yet."

Whisper though it was, a sort of chirrup had come into his voice, like that of a cricket in a baker's shop. I took tight hold of the velveted tag of his gown. He opened the door, pressed the box of safety matches into my hand, himself grasped the candlestick, and then blew out the light. We were instantly marooned in an impenetrable darkness. "Now, sir, if you would kindly remove your walking shoes," he muttered close in my ear, "we should proceed with less noise. I shan't hurry you. And please

to tug at the streamer if you need attention. In a few minutes the blackness will be less intense."

As I stooped down to loose my shoe-laces I heard my heart thumping merrily away. It had been listening to our conversation apparently! I slung my shoes round my neck—as I had often done as a boy when going paddling—and we set out on our expedition.

I have endured too often the nightmare of being lost and abandoned in the stony bowels of some strange and prodigious building to take such an adventure lightly. I clung, I confess, desperately tight to my lifeline, and we groped steadily onward—my guide ever and again turning back to mutter warning or encouragement in my ear.

Now I found myself steadily ascending; and then in a while, feeling my way down flights of hollowly worn stone steps, and anon brushing along a gallery or corkscrewing up a newel staircase so narrow that my shoulders all but touched the walls on either side. In spite of the sepulchral cold in these bowels of the cathedral, I was soon suffocatingly hot, and the effort to see became intolerably fatiguing. Once, to recover our breath, we paused opposite a slit in the thickness of the masonry, at which to breathe the tepid sweetness of the outer air. It was faint with the scent of wild flowers and cool of the sea. And presently after, at a barred window, high overhead, I caught a glimpse of the night's first stars.

We then turned inward once more, ascending yet another spiral staircase. And now the intense darkness thinned a little, the groined roof above us becoming faintly discernible. A fresher air softly fanned my cheek; and

then trembling fingers groped over my breast, and, cold and bony, clutched my own.

"Dead still here, sir, if you please." So close sounded the whispered syllables the voice might have been a messenger's within my own consciousness. "Dead still, here. There's a drop of some sixty or seventy feet a few paces on."

I peered out across the abyss, conscious, as it seemed, of the huge superincumbent weight of the noble fretted roof only a small space now immediately above our heads. As we approached the edge of this stony precipice, the gloom paled a little, and I guessed that we must be standing in some coign of the southern transept, for what light the evening skies now afforded was clearer towards the right. On the other hand, it seemed the northern windows opposite us were most of them boarded up, or obscured in some fashion. Gazing out, I could detect scaffolding poles—like knitting needles—thrust out from the walls and a balloon-like spread of canvas above them. For the moment my ear was haunted by what appeared to be the droning of an immense insect. But this presently ceased. I fancy it was internal only.

"You will understand, sir," breathed the old man close beside me—and we still stood, grotesquely enough, hand in hand—"the scaffolding over there has been in position a good many months now. It was put up when the last gentleman came down from London to inspect the fabric. And there it's been left ever since. Now, sir!—though I implore you to be cautious."

I hardly needed the warning. With one hand clutching my box of matches, the fingers of the other inter-

laced with my companion's, I strained every sense. And yet I could detect not the faintest stir or murmur under that wide-spreading roof. Only a hush as profound as that which must reign in the Royal Chamber of the pyramid of Cheops faintly swirled in the labyrinths of my ear.

How long we stayed in this position I cannot say; but minutes sometimes seem like hours. And then, without the slightest warning, I became aware of a peculiar and incessant vibration. It is impossible to give a name to it. It suggested the remote whirring of an enormous mill-stone, or that—though without definite pulsation—of revolving wings, or even the spinning of an immense top.

In spite of his age, my companion apparently had ears as acute as mine. He had clutched me tighter a full ten seconds before I myself became aware of this disturbance of the air. He pressed closer. "Do you see that, sir?"

I gazed and gazed, and saw nothing. Indeed even in what I had seemed to hear I might have been deceived. Nothing is more treacherous in certain circumstances—except possibly the eye—than the ear. It magnifies, distorts, and may even invent. As instantaneously as I had become aware of it, the murmur had ceased. And then—though I cannot be certain—it seemed the dingy and voluminous spread of canvas over there had perceptibly trembled, as if a huge cautious hand had been thrust out to draw it aside. No time was given me to make sure. The old man had hastily withdrawn me into the opening of the wall through which we had issued; and we made no pause in our retreat until we had come again to the narrow slit of window which I have spoken of and could

refresh ourselves with a less stagnant air. We stood here resting awhile.

"Well, sir?" he enquired at last, in the same flat muffled tones.

"Do you ever pass along here alone?" I whispered.

"Oh, yes, sir. I make it a habit to be the last to leave —and often the first to come; but I am usually gone by this hour."

I looked close at the dim face in profile against that narrow oblong of night. "It is so difficult to be sure of oneself," I said. "Have you ever actually *encountered* anything—near at hand, I mean?"

"I keep a sharp look-out, sir. Maybe they don't think me of enough importance to molest—the last rat, as they say."

"But *have* you?"—I might myself have been communicating with the phantasmal *genius loci* of All Hallows—our muffled voices; this intense caution and secret listening; the slight breathlessness, as if at any instant one's heart were ready for flight: "But *have* you?"

"Well yes, sir," he said. "And in this very gallery. They nearly had me, sir. But by good fortune there's a recess a little further on—stored up with some old fragments of carving, from the original building, sixth-century, so it's said: stone-capitals, heads and hands, and such like. I had had my warning, and managed to leap in there and conceal myself. But only just in time. Indeed, sir, I confess I was in such a condition of terror and horror I turned my back."

"You mean you heard, but didn't look? And—something came?"

"Yes, sir, I seemed to be reduced to no bigger than a

child, huddled up there in that corner. There was a sound like clanging metal—but I don't think it was metal. It drew near at a furious speed, then passed me, making a filthy gust of wind. For some instants I couldn't breathe; the air was gone."

"And no other sound?"

"No other, sir, except out of the distance a noise like the sounding of a stupendous kind of gibberish. A calling; or so it seemed—no human sound. The air shook with it. You see, sir, I myself wasn't of any consequence, I take it—unless a mere obstruction in the way. But—I have heard it said somewhere that the rarity of these happenings is only because it's a pain and torment and not any sort of pleasure for such beings, such apparitions, sir, good or bad, to visit our outward world. That's what I have heard said; though I can go no further.

"The time I'm telling you of was in the early winter —November. There was a dense sea-fog over the valley, I remember. It eddied through that opening there into the candlelight like flowing milk. I never light up now: and, if I may be forgiven the boast, sir, I seem to have almost forgotten how to be afraid. After all, in any walk of life a man can only do his best, and if there weren't such opposition and hindrances in high places, I should have nothing to complain of. What is anybody's life, sir (come past the gaiety of youth) but marking time. . . . Did you hear anything *then,* sir?"

His gentle monotonous mumbling ceased and we listened together. But every ancient edifice has voices and soundings of its own: there was nothing audible that I could put a name to, only what seemed to be a faint perpetual stir or whirr of grinding such as (to one's over-

stimulated senses) the stablest stones set one on top of the other with an ever slightly-varying weight and stress might be likely to make perceptible in a world of matter. A world which, after all, they say, is itself in unimaginably rapid rotation, and under the tyranny of time.

"No, I hear nothing," I answered: "but please don't think I am doubting what you say. Far from it. You must remember I am a stranger, and that therefore the influence of the place cannot but be less apparent to me. And you have no help in this now?"

"No sir. Not now. But even at the best of times we had small company hereabouts, and no money. Not for any substantial outlay, I mean. And not even the boldest suggests making what's called a public appeal. It's a strange thing to me, sir, but whenever the newspapers get hold of anything, they turn it into a byword and a sham. Yet how can they help themselves?—with' no beliefs to guide them and nothing to stay their mouths except about what for sheer human decency's sake they daren't talk about. But then, who am I to complain? And now, sir," he continued with a sigh of utter weariness, "if you are sufficiently rested, would you perhaps follow me on to the roof? It is the last visit I make—though by rights perhaps I should take in what there is of the tower. But I'm too old now for that—clambering and climbing over naked beams; and the ladders are not so safe as they were."

We had not far to go. The old man drew open a squat heavily-ironed door at the head of a flight of wooden stairs. It was latched but not bolted, and admitted us at once to the leaden roof of the building and to the immense amphitheatre of evening. The last faint hues of

sunset were fading in the west; and silver-bright Spica shared with the tilted crescent of the moon the serene lagoon-like expanse of sky above the sea. Even at this height, the air was audibly stirred with the low lullaby of the tide.

The staircase by which we had come out was surmounted by a flat penthouse roof about seven feet high. We edged softly along, then paused once more; to find ourselves now all but *tête-à-tête* with the gigantic figures that stood sentinel at the base of the buttresses to the unfinished tower.

The tower was so far unfinished, indeed, as to wear the appearance of the ruinous; besides which, what appeared to be scars and stains as if of fire were detectable on some of its stones, reminding me of the legend which years before I had chanced upon, that this stretch of coast had more than once been visited centuries ago by pillaging Norsemen.

The night was unfathomably clear and still. On our left rose the conical bluff of the headland crowned with the solitary grove of trees beneath which I had taken refuge from the blinding sunshine that very afternoon. Its grasses were now hoary with faintest moonlight. Far to the right stretched the flat cold plain of the Atlantic—that enormous darkened looking-glass of space; only a distant lightship ever and again stealthily signalling to us with a lean phosphoric finger from its outermost reaches.

The mere sense of that abysm of space—its waste powdered with the stars of the Milky Way; the mere presence of the stony leviathan on whose back we two humans now stood, dwarfed into insignificance beside these gesturing images of stone, were enough of them-

selves to excite the imagination. And—whether matter-of-fact or pure delusion—this old verger's insinuations that the cathedral was now menaced by some inconceivable danger and assault had set my nerves on edge. My feet were numb as the lead they stood upon; while the tips of my fingers tingled as if a powerful electric discharge were coursing through my body.

We moved gently on—the spare shape of the old man a few steps ahead, peering cautiously to right and left of him as we advanced. Once with a hasty gesture he drew me back and fixed his eyes for a full minute on a figure—at two removes—which was silhouetted at that moment against the starry emptiness: a forbidding thing enough, viewed in this vague luminosity, which seemed in spite of the unmoving stare that I fixed on it to be perceptibly stirring on its windworn pedestal.

But no; "All's well!" the old man had mutely signalled to me, and we pushed on. Slowly and cautiously; indeed I had time to notice in passing that this particular figure held stretched in its right hand a bent bow, and was crowned with a high weather-worn stone coronet. One and all were frigid company. At last we completed our circuit of the tower, had come back to the place we had set out from, and stood eyeing one another like two conspirators in the clear dusk. Maybe there was a tinge of incredulity on my face.

"No, sir," murmured the old man, "I expected no other. The night is uncommonly quiet. I've noticed that before. They seem to leave us at peace on nights of quiet. We must turn in again and be getting home."

Until that moment I had thought no more of where I was to sleep or to get food, nor had even realised how

famished with hunger I was. Nevertheless, the notion of fumbling down again out of the open air into the narrow inward blackness of the walls from which we had just issued was singularly uninviting. Across these wide flat stretches of roof there was at least space for flight, and there were recesses for concealment. To gain a moment's respite, I enquired if I should have much difficulty in getting a bed in the village. And as I had hoped, the old man himself offered me hospitality.

I thanked him; but still hesitated to follow, for at that moment I was trying to discover what peculiar effect of dusk and darkness a moment before had deceived me into the belief that some small animal—a dog, a spaniel, I should have guessed—had suddenly and surreptitiously taken cover behind the stone buttress nearby. But that apparently had been a mere illusion. The creature, whatever it might be, was no barker at any rate. Nothing stirred now; and my companion seemed to have noticed nothing amiss.

"You were saying," I pressed him, "that when repairs —restorations—of the building were in contemplation, even the experts were perplexed by what they discovered? What did they actually say?"

"Say, sir!" Our voices sounded as small and meaningless up here as those of grasshoppers in a noonday meadow. "Examine that balustrade which you are leaning against at this minute. Look at that gnawing and fretting—that furrowing above the lead. All that is honest wear and tear—constant weathering of the mere elements, sir—rain and wind and snow and frost. That's honest *nature*-work, sir. But now compare it, if you please, with this St. Mark here; and remember, sir, these

images were intended to be part and parcel of the fabric as you might say, sentries on a castle—symbols, you understand."

I stooped close under the huge gray creature of stone until my eyes were scarcely more than six inches from its pedestal. And, unless the moon deceived me, I confess I could find not the slightest trace of fret or friction. Far from it. The stone had been grotesquely decorated in low relief with a gaping crocodile—a two-headed crocodile; and the angles, knubs and undulations of the creature were cut as sharp as with a knife in cheese. I drew back.

"Now cast your glance upwards, sir. Is that what you would call a saintly shape and gesture?"

What I took to represent an eagle was perched on the image's lifted wrist—but louring and vulture-like. The head of the figure was poised at an angle of defiance—the ears unnaturally high up on the skull; the lean right forearm extended with pointing forefinger as if in derision. Its stony gaze was fixed upon the stars; its whole aspect was undeniably sinister and intimidating. The faintest puff of milk-warm air from over the sea stirred on my cheek. I drew aside.

"Ay, sir, and so with one or two of the rest of them," the old man commented, as he watched me, "there are other wills than the Almighty's."

At this, the pent-up excitement within me broke bounds. This nebulous insinuatory talk!—I all but lost my temper. "I can't, for the life of me, understand what you are saying," I exclaimed in a voice that astonished me with its shrill volume of sound in that intense lofty quiet. "One doesn't *repair* in order to destroy."

The old man met me without flinching. "No, sir? Say you so? And why not? Are there not two kinds of change in this world?—a building-up and a breaking-down? To give strength and endurance for evil or misguided purposes, would that be time wasted, if such was your aim? Why sir, isn't that true even of the human mind and heart? We here are on the outskirts, I grant, but where would you expect the activity to show itself unless in the outer defences? An institution may be beyond dying, sir: it may be being restored for a worse destruction. And a hundred trumpeting voices would make no difference when the faith and life within is tottering to its fall."

Somehow, this muddle of metaphors reassured me. Obviously the old man's wits had worn a little thin: he was the victim of an intelligible but monstrous hallucination.

"And yet you are taking it for granted," I expostulated, "that, if what you say is true, a stranger could be of the slightest help. A visitor—mind you—who hasn't been inside the doors of a church, except in search of what is old and gone, for years."

The old man laid a trembling hand upon my sleeve. The folly of it—with my shoes hanging like ludicrous millstones round my neck!

"If you please, sir," he pleaded, "have a little patience with me. I'm preaching at nobody. I'm not even hinting that them outside the fold circumstantially speaking aren't of the flock. All in good time, sir; the Almighty's time. Maybe—with all due respect—it's from them within we have most to fear. And indeed, sir, believe an old man: I could never express the gratitude I feel.

You have given me the occasion to unbosom myself, to make a clean breast, as they say. All Hallows is my earthly home, and—well, there, let us say no more. You couldn't *help me*—except only by your presence here. God alone knows who can!"

At that instant, a dull enormous rumble reverberated from within the building—as if a huge boulder or block of stone had been shifted or dislodged in the fabric; a peculiar grinding nerve-wracking sound. And for the fraction of a second the flags on which we stood seemed to tremble beneath our feet.

The fingers tightened on my arm. "Come, sir; keep close; we must be gone at once," the quavering old voice whispered; "we have stayed too long."

But we emerged into the night at last without mishap. The little western door, above which the grinning head had welcomed me on my arrival, admitted us to *terra firma* again, and we made our way up a deep sandy track, bordered by clumps of herb agrimony and fennel and hemlock, with viper's bugloss and sea-poppy blooming in the gentle dusk of night at our feet. We turned when we reached the summit of this sandy incline and looked back. All Hallows, vague and enormous, lay beneath us in its hollow, resembling some natural prehistoric outcrop of that sea-worn rock-bound coast; but strangely human and saturnine.

The air was mild as milk—a pool of faintest sweetnesses —gorse, bracken, heather; and not a rumour disturbed its calm, except only the furtive and stertorous sighings of the tide. But far out to sea and beneath the horizon summer lightnings were now in idle play—flickering into the sky like the unfolding of a signal, planet to planet—

then gone. That alone, and perhaps too this feeble moonlight glinting on the ancient glass, may have accounted for the faint vitreous glare that seemed ever and again to glitter across the windows of the northern transept far beneath. And yet how easily deceived is the imagination. This old man's talk still echoing in my ear, I could have vowed this was no reflection but the glow of some light shining fitfully from within outwards.

The old man paused beside a flowering bush of fuchsia at the wicket gate leading into his small square of country garden. "You'll forgive me, sir, for mentioning it; but I make it a rule as far as possible to leave all my troubles and misgivings outside when I come home. My daughter is a widow, and not long in that sad condition, so I keep as happy a face as I can on things. And yet: well, sir, I wonder at times if—if a personal sacrifice isn't incumbent on them that have their object most at heart. I'd go out myself very willingly, sir, I can assure you, if there was any certainty in my mind that it would serve the cause. It would be little to me if——" He made no attempt to complete the sentence.

On my way to bed, that night, the old man led me in on tiptoe to show me his grandson. His daughter watched me intently as I stooped over the child's cot—with that bird-like solicitude which all mothers show in the presence of a stranger.

Her small son was of that fairness which almost suggests the unreal. He had flung back his bedclothes—as if innocence in this world needed no covering or defence—and lay at ease, the dews of sleep on lip, cheek, and forehead. He was breathing so quietly that not the least movement of shoulder or narrow breast was perceptible.

"The lovely thing!" I muttered, staring at him. "Where is he now, I wonder?" His mother lifted her face and smiled at me with a drowsy ecstatic happiness, then sighed.

And from out of the distance there came the first prolonged whisper of a wind from over the sea. It was eleven by my watch, the storm after the long heat of the day seemed to be drifting inland; but All Hallows, apparently, had forgotten to wind its clock.

The Wharf

HE gave a critical pat or two to the handsome cherry bow, turning her head this way then that, as she did so; pulled balloonishly out its dainty loops; then once more twisted round the small figure with its dark little face and dancing burning eyes, and scanned the home-made party frock from in front.

"What does it *look* like, mother?" the small creature cried in the voice of a mermaid: then tucked in her chin like a preening swan to see herself closer. The firelight danced from the kitchen range. There was an inch of snow on the sill of the window, and the evergreen leaves of the bushes of euonymus beyond bore each its platterful of woolly whiteness.

"Please mother. What does I look like?" the chiming voice repeated; "my frock?"

With that wearer within it, it looked for all the world like the white petals of a flower; its flashing crimson fruit just peeping out from beneath. It looked like spindle tree-blossom and spindle berries both together. And the creature inside danced up and down with the motion of a bird on its claws, at sight, first, of the grave intentness and ardour and love in its mother's eyes; and next, in expectation of the wonderful party, which was

now floating there in the offing like a ship in full sail upon the enormous ocean.

"Then I look nice, mother, nice, nice, nice?" she cried. And her mother smiled with half-closed eyes, just as if she were drinking up a tiny little glass of some strange far-fetched wine.

"You are my precious one," she said, still gazing at her. "And you will be *very* good? And eat just a little at a time, and not get over-excited?"

"Oh dear, oh dear," cried the mite, her dark face turning aside in dismay like a tiny cloud from the sunrise; "they won't never, never be done dressing."

"There, now, be still, my dear," her mother pleaded. "You mustn't excite yourself. Why, there they are, you see, coming down the stairs."

And when the three—the two elder fair ones and this—were safely off, she returned to the fire, knelt down to poke it into a blaze, and then reclining softly back upon her heels, remained there awhile, quite still—brooding on a distant day indeed.

Something had reminded her of a scene—a queer little scene when you came to think of it, but one she would never forget, though she seldom had even the time to brood over it. And now there was one whole long hour of peace and solitude before her. She was with herself. It was a scene, even in this distant retrospect entangled, drenched, in a darkness which, thank Heaven, she could only just vaguely recall. To return back even in thought into that would be like going down into a coal-mine. Worse; for "nerves" have other things to frighten one with than merely impenetrable darkness. The little scene itself, of course, quite small now because so far away,

had come afterwards. It shone uncommonly like a star on a black winter night. And yet not exactly winter; for cold wakens the body before putting it to sleep. And that time was like the throes of a nightmare in a hot still huge country—a country like Africa; enormous and sinister and black.

And so, piece by piece, as it had never returned to her before, she explored the whole beginning of that strange experience. She remembered kneeling as she was now, half sitting on her heels, and looking into a fire. A kitchen fire, then, as now; though not this kitchen. And not winter, but early May. And behind her the two elder children were playing, in their blue overalls, the fair hair gently shimmering in the napes of their necks as they stooped over their toys. It was, of course, before this house, before tiny Nell had come—dark and different from her two quiet sisters. And yet—good gracious me, how strange things are!

As now at this moment, she had been alone in that kitchen, even though the children were there. And alone as she had never been before. It seemed as though she had come to the end of things—a vacant abyss. Her husband had gone on to his work after having been with her to the doctor. She remembered that doctor—a taciturn, wide-faced man, who had listened to her symptoms without the least change of countenance, just steadily fixing his gray eyes on her face. Still, however piercing their attention, and whatever the symptoms, they could only have guessed at the horror within.

And then her husband had brought her home again, and after consoling her as best he could, had gone off late and anxious to his work, leaving her in utter despair.

She must go away at once into the country, the doctor had said, and go away without company: must leave everything and rest. Rest! She had hated the very thought of the country: its green fields, its living things, and the long days and evenings with nothing to do; and then the nights! Even though a farm was the very place in the world she would have wished to have been born in, to live in, and there to die, she would be more than ever at the mercy there of those horrors within. And country people can stare and pry, too. They despise Londoners.

The extraordinary thing was that though her husband had reeled off to the doctor, as if he had learned it all by heart, as if he wanted to get rid of it once and for all, the long list of her symptoms, the one worst symptom of them all he had never had the faintest glimpse of. His pale face, that queer frown between his eyebrows and the odd uncertain way in which he had moved his mouth as he was speaking, though they showed that, though he was talking by rote, or, rather, talking just as men do, with the one idea of making himself clear and business-like, were yet proof too of what he was feeling. But not a single word he had said had touched her inmost secret. He hadn't an inkling that her awful state, body and soul, was centred on *him.*

She could smile to herself now to think what contortions the body may twist itself into when anything goes wrong in the mind. That detestation of food, those dizzying moments when you twirl helplessly on a kind of vacant devilish merry-go-round; that repetition of one thought on and on like a rat in a cage; those forebodings rising up one after the other like clouds out of the sea in an Arabian tale. Why, she had had symptoms enough

for every patent medicine there was. She smiled again at thought of her portrait appearing in the advertisements in the newspapers for pills and tonics, her hand clutching the small of her back, or clamped over a knotted forehead.

Still, though she quite agreed now, and had almost agreed then, that it had been wise to see the doctor, and though she agreed now beyond all telling that she owed him what was infinitely more precious even than life itself; still she hadn't breathed to her husband one word about that dream; not a word. And never would. Not even if she lay dying, and if its living horror came to her then again—though it never would—in the hope of crushing her once for all, utterly and for ever.

It was something no one could tell anybody. There were vile things enough in the world for every one to read and share, but this was one not even a newspaper could print, simply because she supposed no one could realise except herself how abject, how unendurable it was. Perhaps this was because it was a dream, she wondered. Dreams are more terrible than anything that happens in the day, in the real world.

A gentle quietude had descended upon her face lit up by the firelight there. It was as if the very thought of a dream had endued it with the expression of sleep. Nor, of course, was there anything to harm her now. This was yet another mystery concerning the life one's spirit lives in a dream, in sleep. The worst of haunting dreams may lose not only its poison, its horror, it may even lose its meaning, just as dreams of happiness and peace, in the glare and noise of day, may lose the secret of their beauty. Not that *this* particular dream had ever lost its mean-

ing. It had kept its meaning, though what came after had completely changed it—turned it outside in, so to speak.

And now, since she was sane and "normal" again, just the mother of her three children, with her work to do, and able to do it—the meanings did not seem really to matter very much. You must just live on, she was thinking to herself, and do all you have to do, and not push about or pierce too much into your hidden mind. Leave it alone; you will be happier so. Griefs come of themselves. They break in like thieves, destroying as they go. No need to seek *them* out, anticipate *them!*

But what a mercy her husband had been the kind of man he was—so patient over those horrible symptoms, so matter-of-fact. It was absurd of the doctor to try to hurry him on, to get testy. Clever people are all very well, but if her husband had been clever or conceited he would have noticed she was keeping something back—might have questioned her. And then she would have been beyond hope—crazy.

And that, of course, put one face to face with the unanswerable question: Was what she had seen real? *Was* there such a place? Were there such dreadful beings? After all, places you could not see had real existence—think of the vast mountainous forests of the world and the deserts and all their horrors! And perhaps after death? . . . For a while the white-faced clock on the wall overhead, hanging above the burnished row of kitchen tins, ticked out its seconds, without so much as one further thought passing in her mind. The room was deliciously warm; all the familiar things in it were friendly. This was home. And in an hour or two her husband would

return to it; and a little later their three girls: the two fair ones, with the little dark creature—tired probably and a little fretful—between them. And life would begin again.

She was happy now. But thinking too much was unwise. That had really been at the root of her Uncle Willie's malady. He could not rest, and then had become hopelessly "silly"—then, his "visitors!" What a comfort to pretend for a moment to be like one of those empty jugs on the dresser; or, rather, not quite empty but with a bunch of flowers in one! And a fresh bunch every day. If you remain empty, ideas come creeping in—as horrible things as the "movies" show; prowling things. And in sleep, too, one's mind is empty, waiting for dreams to well in. It is always dangerous—leaving doors ajar.

And so—she had merely come round to the same place once more. But now, and for the first time since that visit to the country, she could afford to face the whole experience. It was surprising how its worst had evaporated. It had begun in the March by her being just "out of sorts," overtired and fretful. But she had got better. And then, while she was going up to bed that night—seven years ago now—her candle had been blown out by a draught from the dark open landing window. Nothing of consequence had happened during the evening. Her husband had been elated by a letter from an old friend of his bachelor days, and she herself had been doing needlework. And yet, this absurd little accident to her candle had resembled the straw too many on the camel's back.

It had seemed like an enemy—that puff of wind: as if a spectre had whispered, "Try the dark!" And she had

sat down there on the stairs in the gloom and had begun to cry. Without a sound the burning tears had slowly rolled down her cheeks as if from the very depths of her life. "So *this* was the meaning of everything!" they seemed to tell her. "It is high time you were told." The fit was quickly over. The cold air at the landing window had soothed her, and in a moment or two she had lit her candle again, and, as if filled with remorse, had looked in on her two sleeping children, and after kissing them, gone on to bed.

And it was in the middle of that night her dream had come. After stifling in her pillow a few last belated sobs, lest her husband should hear her, she had fallen asleep. And she had dreamed that she was standing alone on the timbers of a kind of immense Wharf, beside a wide sluggish stream. There was no moon, and there were no stars, so far as she could remember, in the sky. Yet all around her was faintly visible. The water itself as if of its own slow moving darkness, seemed to be luminous. She could see that darkness as if by its own light: or rather was conscious of it, as if all around her was taking its light from herself. How absurd!

The wharf was built on piles that plunged down into the water and into the slime beneath. There were flights of stone steps on the left, and up there, beyond, loomed what appeared to be immense unwindowed buildings, like warehouses or granaries; but these she could not see very plainly. Confronting her, further down the wharf, and moored to it by a thick rope, floated on the river a huge and empty barge. There was a wrapped figure stooping there, where the sweeps jut out, as if in profound sleep. And above the barge, on the wharf itself, lay a vague

irregular mass of what apparently had come out of the barge.

It was at the spectacle of the mere shape of this foul mass, it seemed, that she had begun to be afraid. It would have horrified her even if she had been alone in the solitude of the wharf—even in the absence of the gigantic apparition-like beings who stood round about it; busy with great shovels, working silently in company. They, she realised, were unaware of her presence. They laboured on, without speech, intent only on their office. And as she watched them she could not have conceived it was possible to be so solitary and terrified and lost.

There was no Past in her dream. She stood on this dreadful wharf, beside this soundless and sluggish river under the impenetrable murk of its skies, as if in an eternal Present. And though she could scarcely move for terror, some impulse within impelled her to approach nearer to discover what these angelic yet horrifying shapes were at. And as she drew near enough to them to distinguish the faintly flaming eyes in their faces, and the straight flax-coloured hair upon their heads, even the shape of their enormous shovels, she became aware of yet another presence standing close beside her, more shadowy than they, more closely resembling her own phantom self.

But though it was beyond her power to turn and confront it, it seemed that by its influence she realised what cargo the barge had been carrying up the stream and had disgorged upon the wharf. It was a heap, sombre and terrific, of a kind of refuse. The horror of this realisation shook her even now, as she knelt there, the flames of the kitchen fire lighting up her fair blonde face.

For, as if through a whisper in her consciousness from the companion that stood beside her—she knew that this refuse was the souls of men; the souls not of utterly vile and evil men (if such there were; and no knowledge was given to her of where *their* souls lay or where the blessed) but of ordinary nondescript men "wayfaring men, though fools." Yet nothing but what seemed to be a sublime indifference to their laborious toil and to its object, showed on the faces of the labourers on the wharf.

Perhaps if there had been any speech among them, or if any sound no more earthly than echo in her imagination—of their movements had reached her above the flowing of that vast dark stealthy stream, and above the scrapings on the timbers of the shovels, almost as large as those used in an oast-house, she would have been less afraid.

But this unfathomable silence seemed to intensify the gloom as she watched; every object there became darker yet more sharply outlined, so that she could see more clearly, up above, the immense steep-walled warehouses. For now *their* walls too seemed to afford a gentle luminosity. And one thought only was repeating itself again and again in her mind: The souls, the souls, of men! *The souls, the souls, of men!*

And then, beyond human heart to bear, the secret messenger beside her let fall into consciousness another seed of thought. She realised that her poor husband's soul was there in that vast nondescript heap; and those of loved-ones gone, wayfarers, friends of her childhood, her girlhood, and of those nearer yet, valueless, neglected—being shovelled away by these gigantic, angelic beings.

"Oh, my dear, my dear," she was weeping within. And, as with afflicted lungs and bursting temples she continued to gaze, suddenly out of the nowhere of those skies, two or three angle-winged birds swooped down and alighting in greed near by, covertly watched the toilers.

And one, bolder than the rest, scurried forward on scowering wing, and leapt back into the air burdened with its morsel out of that accumulation. The sight of it pierced her being in this eternity as if that morsel were her own. And suddenly one of the shapes, and not an instant too soon, had lifted its shovel, brandishing it on high above his head, with a shrill resounding cry—"Harpy!"

The cry shattered the silence, reverberated on and on, wharf, warehouse, starless arch, and she had awakened: had awakened to her small homely bedroom. It was bathed as if with beauty by the beams of the nightlight that shone on a small table beside her bed where used to sleep her three-year old. It was safety, assurance, peace; and yet unreal. Unreal even her husband—his simple face perfectly still and strange in sleep—lying quietly beside her. And she—lost amid the gloom of her own mind.

Tell *that* dream—never, never! But yet now in this quiet firelight, so many cares over—and, above all, that dreary entanglement of the mind a thing of the past—what alone still kept the dream a secret was not so much its horror, but its shame. The shame not only that she should have dreamed such a dream, but that she should as it were have seen only its horror and had become its slave.

To have believed in such a doom; to have supposed that

God . . . But she could afford to smile indulgently now at this weakness and cowardice and infidelity. She could afford it simply because of Mr. Simmonds, the farmer. That was the solemn, the really-and-truly amusing truth. It was that rather corpulent, short, red-faced Mr. Simmonds who had been responsible for the very happiest moment in her life: who had saved her, had saved far more even than her "reason."

Her husband, of course, knew how much they owed to his kindness. But he did not know that he owed Mr. Simmonds her very heart's salvation, if that was not a conceited way of putting it. And yet it was this Mr. Simmonds—she laughed softly out loud as she gazed on into the fire—it was this Mr. Simmonds who had at first sight, in his old brown coat and mud-caked gaiters, reminded her of a potato! Of a potato and then an apple, one of those cobbled apples, their bright red faded a little and the skin drawn up. His smile was like that, as dry as it was sweet like cider.

What an interminable Sunday that had been before her husband and the two children had said good-bye to her at the railway station. How that man in spectacles had stared at her over his newspaper. Then the ride in the trap, her roped box behind, and Mrs. Simmonds, and the farm. Two or three times a day at least she had rushed out in imagination to drown everything in the looking-glass-like pond among the reeds not very far from the farm. And yet all the time, though Mrs. Simmonds knew she was "queer," she could not possibly have guessed, while she was talking to her of an evening in the parlour, the things that were flaring and fleering in her mind like the noises and sights of a fair.

The doctor had said—looking at her very steadily: "But you won't, you must remember, be really much alone, because you will have your home and your children to think of. You will have them. Think as little as possible about everything else. Just rest, and be looked after."

The consequence of which had been the suspicion that she was being not merely "looked after" but watched. And she would openly pretend to set out from the farm in another direction when she was bent on looking once more at her reflection in the pond. None the less she had remembered what the doctor had said, had held on to it almost as if it had been a bag she was carrying and must keep safe. And by and by in the haymelds, in the lanes by the hedges, she had begun to be a quieter companion to herself and even glad of Mrs. Simmonds's company, and of talking to her plump brown-haired daughter, or to the pale skimpy dairy-maid.

It was curious though that, while passing the opening in the farm-wall she had never failed to cast a glance towards that dark distant mound with its flowers beyond the yard, she had never really noticed it. She had seen it, even admired its burden, but not definitely attended to it. It had taken her fancy and yet not her eye. She had been far less conscious of it, for example, than of the pretty Jersey heifer that was sometimes there, and even of the tortoiseshell cat, and the cocks and hens, and of the geese in the green meadow.

All these she saw with an extraordinary clearness, as if she were looking at them from out of a window in a strange world. They quieted her mind without her being aware of it, and she would talk of them to Mrs. Sim-

monds partly because she was interested to hear about them; partly to keep her in the room; and partly so that she might think of other things while the farmer's wife was talking. Of other things indeed!—when first and foremost, like a huge louring storm-cloud on the horizon of a sea, there never left her mind for a single moment the memory and influence of her dream. It would sweep back on her, so much distorting her face and clouding her eyes that she would be compelled to turn her head away out of the glare of the parlour lamp, in case Mrs. Simmonds should notice it.

And then came that calm, sunlit afternoon. She had had quiet sleep the night before. It had been her first night at the farm untroubled by sudden galvanic leaps into consciousness and by the swarming cries and phantom faces that appeared as soon as her tired-out eyes hid themselves from the tiny radiance of the nightlight.

She had been for a walk—yes, and to the reed-pond—and had there promised her absent husband and her two children never to go there again unless she could positively bear herself no longer. She had promised; and, quieted in mind, she was coming back. She remembered even thinking with pleasure of the home-made jam that Mrs. Simmonds would give her for her tea.

There was no doubt at all, then, that she had been getting better—just as before (when the dream came) she had been really, though secretly, getting worse. And as she was turning in home by the farm-gate, she saw Nellie, the heifer, there; the nimble young fawn-haired creature, with its delicate head and lustrous eyes with their long lashes; and she had advanced in her silly London fashion, with a handful of coarse grass, to make real

friends with her. The animal had sidled away and then had trotted off into the farmyard, and she had followed it with an unusual effort of will.

The sun was pouring its light in abundance out of the west on the whitewashed walls and stones and living creatures in the yard; midges in the air, wagtails, chaffinches in the golden straw, a wren scolding, a cart-horse in reverie at the gate, and the deep black-shadowed holes of the byres and stables.

Still eluding her, Nellie had edged across the yard; and it was then that, lifting her eyes beyond the retreating creature, she had caught sight of that mound, now near at hand, and had realised what it was. She had realised what it was almost as if because her dream had instantly returned with it, almost as if the one thing were the "familiar" of the other. But the horror now was more distant. She could not even (more than vaguely, like reflection in water) see those shapes with the shovels simply because what she now saw in actuality was so vivid and lovely a thing. It was a heap of old stable manure; and it must have lain there where it was for a very long time, since it was strayed over in every direction, and was lit up with the tufted colours of at least a dozen varieties of wild-flowers. Her glance wandered to and fro from bell to bell and cup to cup; the harsh yet sweet odour of the yard and stables was in her nostrils: that of hay was in the air; and into the distance stretched meadow and field under the sky, their crops sprouting, their green deepening.

And as she stood, densely gazing at this heap, she herself it had seemed became nothing more than that picture in her eyes. And then Mr. Simmonds had come out and

across the yard, his flannel shirt-sleeves tucked up above his thick sun-burned arms, and a pitch-fork in his hand. He had touched his hat with that almost school-boyish little gentle grin of his; then when he noticed that she was trying to speak to him, had stood beside her, leaning on his pitch-fork, his glance following the direction of her eyes.

For a moment or two she had been unable to utter a syllable for sheer breathlessness, and had turned her face aside a little under its wide-brimmed hat, stammering on, and then almost whispering, as if she were a mere breath of wind and he a dense deep-rooted oak-tree. But he had caught the word "flowers" easily enough.

There must have been at least a score of varieties on that foster-mothering heap; complete little families of them: silver, cream, crimson, rose-pink, stars and cups and coronals, and a most marvellous green in their leaves, all standing still together there in the windless ruddying light of the sun. And Mr. Simmonds had told her a few of their country names, the very sounds of them like the happy things themselves.

She had explained how exquisitely fresh they looked —not like street-flowers—though she supposed of course that to him they were mere waste—just "wild" flowers.

And he had replied, with his courteous "ma'ams" and those curiously bright blue eyes of his in his plain plump face, that it was no wonder they flourished there. And as for being "waste," why, they were kind of enjoying themselves, he supposed, and welcome to it.

He had been amused, too, in an almost courtly fashion at her disjointed curious questions about the heap. It was just "stable-mook"; and the older that is, of course,

the better. It would be used all right some time, he assured her. The wild flowers, pretty creatures, wouldn't harm it; not they. They'd fade by the winter and *become* it. Some were what they called annuals, he explained, and some perennials. The birds brought the seeds in their droppings, or the wind carried them, or the roots just wandered about of themselves. You couldn't keep them out of the fields! That was another matter. You see there you had other things to mind. And with that charlock over there! . . ."

And still she persisted, struggling as it were in the midst of the dream vaguely hanging its shrouds in her mind, as if towards a crevice of light to come out by. And Mr. Simmonds had been patience and courtesy itself. He had told her about the various chemical manures they used on the crops. That was one thing. But there was, she gathered, what was called "nature" in *this* stuff. It was not exactly the very life of the flowers, for that came you could not tell whence, it is the "virtue" in it. It and the rain and the dew was just as much and as little their life-blood—their sap—as the drink and victuals of humans and animals are. "If you starve a lad, ma'am, keep him from his victuals, he don't exactly flourish, do he?"

Oh yes, he agreed such facts were strange, and, as you might say almost unknowledgable. A curious thing, too, that what to some seems just filth and waste and nastiness should be the very secret of all that is most precious in the living things of the world. But then, we don't all think alike; "'t wouldn't do, d'ye see?" Why, he had explained and she had listened to him as quietly as a child at school, the roots of a tree will bend

at right angles after the secret waters underneath. He crooked his forefinger to show her how. And the groping hair-like filaments of the shallowest weed would turn towards a richer food in the soil. "We farmers couldn't do without it, ma'am." If the nature's out of a thing, it is as good as dead and gone, for ever. Wasn't it now the "good-nature" in a human being that made him what he was? That and what you might call his very life. "Look at Nellie, there! Don't her just comfort your eye in a manner of speaking?"

And whether it was Mr. Simmonds's words, or the way he said them, as if for her comfort—and they were as much a part and parcel of his own good nature as were his brown hairy arms and his pitch-fork and the creases on his round face; or whether it was just the calm copious gentle sunshine that was streaming down on them from across the low heavens, and on the roofs and walls of the yard, and on that rich brown-and-golden heap of stable manure with its delicate colonies of live things shedding their beauty on every side, nodding their heads in the lightest of airs; she could not tell. At that very moment and as if for joy a red cock clapped his wings on the midden, and shouted his *Qui vive.*

At this, a whelming wave of consolation and understanding seemed to have enveloped her very soul. Mr. Simmonds may have actually seen the tears dropping from her eyes as she turned to smile at him, and to thank him. She didn't mind. It was nothing in the world in her perhaps that he would ever be able to understand. He would never know, never even guess that he had been her predestined redemption.

For a while they had stood there in silence, like figures

in a picture. Nellie had long since wandered off, grazing her way across the meadow. She had now joined the other cows, though she herself was but a heifer, and had not yet calved or given milk. How "out of it" a Londoner was in country places! Her very love of it was a kind of barrier between herself and Mr. Simmonds.

And yet, not an impassable one. Knowing that she was "ill," and being a "family man," and sympathetic, he had understood a little. She had at last hastened away into the house; and shutting her door on herself, had flung herself down at her bedside, remaining there on her knees, with nothing in the nature of a thought in her mind, not a word on her lips; conscious of no more than an incredibly placid vacancy and the realisation that the worst was over . . .

The kitchen fire had lapsed into a brilliant glow, unbroken by any flame. Her lids smarted; she had stared so long without blinking into its red. She must have been kneeling there for hours, thus lost in memory. Her glance swept up in dismay to the clock; and at that instant she heard the scraping of her husband's latch-key in the lock—and his evening meal not even so much as laid yet!

She sprang to her feet and, stumbling a little because one of them had "gone to sleep," met him in the doorway. "I am late," she breathed into his shoulder, putting her arms round his neck with an intensity of greeting that astonished even his familiar knowledge of her. "But there were the children to get off. And then I just sat down there by the fire a minute. Jim: don't think I'm never thankful. You were kind to me that time

I was ill. Kinder than ever you can possibly think or imagine. But we won't say anything about that.

Her arms slipped down to her sides; a sort of absentness spread itself over her faintly-lit features, her cheeks flushed by the fire. "I've been day-dreaming—just thinking: *you* know. How queer things are! Can you really believe that that Mr. Simmonds is at the farm *now*, this very moment?" Her voice sank lower. "It's all snow; and soon it will be getting dark; and the cows have been milked; and the fields are fading away out of the light; and the pond with the reeds. . . . It's still; like a dream and now. . . ."

And her husband, being tireder than usual that afternoon, cast a rather dejected look at the empty table. But he spoke up bravely: "And how did the youngsters get off? They must have been a handful!"

He smoothed her smooth hair with his hand. But she seemed still too deeply immerged and far-lost in her memory of the farm to answer for a moment, and then her words came as if by rote.

"'A handful'? They *were*—and that tiny thing!—I am sometimes, you know, Jim, almost afraid of those wild spirits—as if she might—just burst into tiny pieces—into bits some day—like glass. It's such a world to have to be careful in!"

The Lost Track

8 Ranley Street.
S.W. 2.

My Dear James,—

You remember that night we stayed up talking—a week or two before Christmas, wasn't it? Anyhow, not very long after I came back from America. It was a good talk—the kind that always reminds me of old sherry and bath olivers (yours the Amontillado); but there came a moment in it when—well, bubbles began to rise. It was soon after Bettie had looked in—tilting us that queer half-derisive glance women always reserve for men surprised in their natural haunts and habits. She gave us up in despair, said good-night, and went off to bed. At that moment, I remember, you were humped up over the fire and knocking out your pipe on the bars of the grate; and you remarked between the two halves of a yawn: "So you didn't have any actual adventures, then? Worth talking about, I mean?"

I smiled to myself as I looked at you through the smoke. Worth talking about! Perhaps, if you had been the least bit less complacent and insular you would have noticed that I made no reply. Your taken-for-granted was, of course, first, that I am not the sort of creature

to whom anything worth happening happens, and next, that in any case things worth happening are not in the habit of happening "over there."

But in this particular case, you were wrong on both counts. At least, so I think. And from the moment when—as we steamed gently on—half-suffocated with home-sickness, I caught my first glimpse of the low-lying lovely emerald of the Isle of Wight through a placid haze of English drizzle, I have been pining to share with you what I am going to tell you now. It sounds a little absurd to say that a promise given in America made this impossible until the day before yesterday; but so it is. But now that is done with. The whole episode is over and done with—so far at least as *anything* can be done with in a world where even the whirr of a grasshopper never ceases to echo.

I suppose the smile with which I met your question was a sort of lie—a colourless one, I hope. But even if I had answered you with the bare facts—you wouldn't have believed me. Probably you won't believe me now—though you are bound to confess human nature rarely writes a letter of this length merely to deceive without gain! And as you are off on Tuesday, and I shan't see you for weeks, this had better not wait.

Then again, it's a little habit of yours to assume that life in these days is all but played-out and that the only things worth much consideration are of the mind or by way of books. In other words, that the really raw material of life is fit only for the newspapers, the police-courts, and the "movies." In a way I agree with you. I agree, I mean, that events are only of importance in relation to our Selves. If they make *no* appeal to the imagination, that

is, they are mostly null and void. Now the amusing thing (at least, I suppose it is amusing) is that my American adventure is as raw as pickled cabbage. It is precisely the stuff that films and shockers are made of. I can see—for I have returned from their fountain-head—the appropriate newspaper headlines. I believe you will agree too that it is of the "twopence coloured" variety, rather than the "penny plain"; and it continues to haunt me.

I don't see how things without any "meaning"—whatever that may mean—can do that. On the other hand, I can't be quite sure even of what I mean by its meaning. Still, there are things in life that drop like stones into a dark subterranean pool. One leans over, listens to the reverberations, hears them die away, looks up—and the grass is of a livelier green than ever, the sky of an incredible blue, and the butterfly on a tuft of thrift nearby a miracle.

What follows then is merely a plain and precise account. It is not intended to titillate your fastidious taste in style. You need not even bother to read it if you feel disinclined. But if you do read it, I should like a word later on concerning one or two points in it that will suggest themselves; and this, by the way, is the first word I have breathed on the subject to a living soul. . . .

Time: Late October; Scene: U. S. A.

By a piece of real good fortune I had been staying a day or two a little South—South of Washington, at any rate. For I saw the country. I had then been in America about seven weeks. If I use the phrase "Ameri-

can hospitality" you will probably shrug your thick shoulders and smile. The actual fact is, though, that that hospitality is (*a*) sincere; (*b*) boundless; and (*c*) may set one speculating a little closely on the English variety. From out of the bosom of one family into which I had been welcomed without the smallest hesitation or forethought I had sent on a letter of introduction to yet another American friend from English friends of mine: the usual kind of letter with the usual kind of remarks concerning the bearer.

The answer came by return of post. In brief: Would I give the signatories—husband and wife—the inexpressible happiness of remaining their guest for the rest of my days on earth. I had discovered from a map that they were living thirty miles or so beyond a fairly large town across country still further South and West—I am not going to mention any names yet. I set out. And as I was still only a novice in the land where a twenty-four hours' railway journey is looked upon as a jaunt one can enjoy between tea and supper, the novelties were for me novelties still.

The green-upholstered armchair in the vast metallic Pullman car, for example; the sound of the voices; the cut of the faces; the ecstatic bill of fare in the dining-car—you write your order on a slip—Turkey and Cranberries, Chicken Pie, Six-inch Oysters, Green Corn on the Cob (eaten monkey fashion), the divinest Scallops in the world: and Prices to match! Then, too, the courteous white-laundered waiters with hands and faces ranging from blackest ebony to creamiest cream; the ice; and, of course, the landscape. On and on.

Rather neglected-looking woods and fields; suggesting

that they are still scared by the encroachments of civilisation; maize ("Corn") in stook; pumpkins (punkins) in heaps; running water; wooden houses; and the occasional town—with its ancient buggy; its drug-store; its Fords (early fourteenth-century); and the dread knolling of the engine's bell—surely, apart from that monster's prehistoric trumpetings, the saddest sound in Christendom—as one's huge metallic caravan edges slowly through Main Street.

I am an excellent traveller, for throughout any journey in unknown parts I am in a continual effervescing state of anxiety and foreboding. I invariably expect to go astray, and as invariably hope, yet dread, that I shall. But you can't (any more than your baggage) go far astray on any American railway, provided you can understand what the "conductor" says.

All went well. The black fellow, smiling on me like Friday's long-lost father, gave me my "brush-off" (not brush-up or brush-down, you will notice), and I (a little shamefacedly) gave him a quarter. He took out my suitcase—my grip—he let down the clanging steps, and deposited the wooden stool beneath them. I descended. And there, with open arms and angelic faces, stood two strangers who, as quickly as you can switch on an electric light in a dark room, were at once my friends—and for life, I hope. We got into their car; it was latish afternoon; and in about half an hour were at their house. I had been talking so hard to my hostess that I had caught scarcely a glimpse of the view, though I had absorbed it through my pores, none the less.

It was rather a queer meal, that first dinner that evening. I remember talking nineteen to the dozen and

noticing how unusually brilliant a sparkle the silver and glass had, and also how much more violent my headache was than it had been in the train. I recalled the heated frequency of my visits to the little ice-water reservoir in the railway carriage. You drink it out of a small envelope. I got to bed, however, without saying anything. But next morning there was no disguising the fact that I had a rollicking temperature, pains in the limbs, aching at the back of the eyes and so on: all the usual symptoms.

Did my host and hostess tack me up instantly in a piece of old sacking, replace me in their car, and dump me down on the nearest goods platform? Not a bit of it. Nor did they pour oil and smuggled wine into my wounds and pass me on with twopence to the nearest innkeeper. They stood on either side of the bed, irradiated with delight. Now, if a stranger from over the seas were taken ill in my house, I should first assure him what an exquisite privilege and joy it would be to nurse him back to health again. And then I should go downstairs and muse gently how pitiful it is that mortality may be subject to ills so inconsiderate.

Not so my friends in America (and no names yet, so we will call them Flora and John). They were enraptured. Their eyes shone with triumph as they brandished the thermometer. If you'd only die, they all but assured me, we'd give you a costlier funeral than ever was on sea or land. Bricks, both of them.

The doctor—the doc—came, saw, and sent me a bottle of medicine. It was 'flu, of course, and for days together I lay there, in Luxury's ample lap, looking out from my bed through a window over the countryside, reading

Isabel Ostrander, Freeman Wills Crofts, with interludes of O. Henry, nibbling grapes, and imbibing beef-juice —not to speak of oysters and champagne (think of it!) in due season.

I had come for a week-end. It was six days before I was up again. On the eighth I was "down." Even then, said the doctor, I must not yet attempt to go on my travels. He knew his patrons. His veto was followed by a chorus of delicious "Surelies!" from Flora and John. By the Wednesday of that week I was horribly normal, and being taken for walks and drives. The following Friday, my host and hostess were booked for a visit themselves. Did they speed the parting guest? Not they. They insisted that I should stay on at their house until they came back. Was I quite sure that I should be perfectly happy and comfortable? The servants were, with one exception, black, but comely. Did I really mind being left alone? It was hateful of them to have to go; they would never forgive themselves, but . . . I hesitated, languished, and gave way.

Allons, once more. Now, in the first place, I suppose you suppose there isn't any "country" in the United States? There are excuses for you, because I myself had read a good many American novels without fully realising what country there is; and till then I had seen chiefly cities. But, gracious heavens, what country! Here, it was a little like a beautiful kind of Wiltshire or Somerset; but vaster, stretching leagues and leagues away to Columbus knows where, and still all but virgin: virginally free, virginally romantic.

It was October, you will remember, and I had chanced on one of the loveliest Falls since the *Mayflower* landed

its pilgrims on Plymouth Rock. I was by this time as right as a trivet again, though still conscious of the queer novelty and unexpectedness in things which even a slight illness produces, especially 'flu. Every mere man supposes, of course, that a rising temperature is a summons to the grave. Mine had proved only a *caveat,* and I was at once roving around in the little two-seater that Flora and John had handed over to me for my special recreation.

They left the house on a Friday afternoon, and on the next my adventure began. I must have trundled on at haphazard about fifteen or twenty miles or so, having turned off from the State road perhaps ten minutes after I left the house, and having clean forgotten that the area of the two Virginias is more than half as large as England. The lane or by-road in which I then found myself had grown steadily more and more like a cart-track, and ever wilder and lovelier. Apart from the incessant multitudinous rasping of the grass-green katydids and crickets —some brilliantly coloured that fly for a few yards at a stretch—the air was marvellously still over those low hills of fading woods. Above them hung a pale blue afternoon sky, brimmed with sunshine of a gentle and mellow intensity, its shafts eddying silken soft through the dells and dingles around me; shafts, discs, splashes, gilding the very marrow in my bones, surfeiting my eyes and bathing me with delight—a satisfaction, by the way, not discounted by the thought of the weather you were probably enduring at home.

And the colours! Our English autumn, poor beloved sweetheart, is a comparative child in such matters. Here the trees—oak, dogwood, maple, hickory, sumach—mas-

querade for weeks together in coats that would have made Jacob weep aloud: amber-yellow, coral-pink, a wondrous rose, blood-red—Bluebeard red. Mounting in cones and domes and triangles above the grayish grass and the sand-colour of the soil, they draped the hills around me, while the track steadily edged off out of civilisation, and I went bobbing over its boulders and chasms like a Jack-in-a-box or a monkey-on-a-stick. The only fellow human I had passed—and that was miles behind—was an old negro with a grizzled head who was leading a long-eared mule attached to a low, faded, red-and-green farm-cart.

I had come to a patch of flattish ground just wide enough to afford me turning room. I got out, intending to push on a few paces beyond a turn in the track in order to get a glimpse of what lay beyond. And, looking down from there into the gully below, I saw—now what do you think?—not a dryad, not a Sioux camp counting its scalps, not a chorus of blackamoors around a keg of rum—but a fragment of abandoned railway line—a phrase, by the way, that amuses our American cousins. There were but twenty yards or so of it in sight, and it was not exactly in spick-and-span order. The gauge was narrow. The steel rails had been torn up. Only the rotting sleepers remained, matted with weeds and bordered with Queen Ann's lace, golden rod and Michaelmas daisy. A row of telegraph poles (never neat and spruce like ours, but ungainly and crooked) held only one cross-bar each, and that adorned with two bright-green twinkling insulators.

In that country of distances, netted over by scores of thousands of miles of railroads (see *Whittaker* or *The World's Almanac*) on which for ever pound monsters

that would set an antediluvian pterodactyl gaping, this narrow derelict strip looked immeasurably aged, forlorn, and romantic. I was a bit tired, too; and of course that helps. One's fancy grows a little greedy after illness. Having glanced round for traces of poison-ivy, I sat down on a hump of rock to look at it.

The line, as I say, led out of a gully and into a gully. And anything, my dear James, which, like Life itself, emanates from no discernible whence, and vanishes out into no detectable whither, is—well, you notice it. My heart leapt up when I beheld that derelict below. And gently, without any warning, as I sat staring downward, there entered upon it, as if moved by clockwork, a man in a cloak and a hat. The eyes under that hat's brim were bent upon the sleepers as he stepped rapidly on from one to another. He was not tall; the inch of cheek I could see was waxy pale; and his hands were out of sight. He just glided on from sleeper to sleeper: was gone. The clockwork had removed him out of my sight again. It reminded me of a toy I had as a child.

Why this commonplace spectacle interested me to such a degree I can hardly say. He might have been a phantom. The sun shone on. The katydids continued their courting and their concert; though come but one touch of frost, and as if at the flick of a conductor's baton, that annual harvest festival instantly ceases. Death no more than wags once an icy finger.

The only other sound was that of shallow running water, and the cry (I think) of mockingbirds. Two things instantly occurred to me: first, I at once badly wanted to follow up the track in the direction from which the human just gone had appeared; and next, I felt a

curious apprehension at doing so. There was something in the effect of him oddly exotic and dubious. He stirred vague remembrances of the "movies," and—now I come to think of it—of no less a man of genius than Mr. Charles Chaplin. Have you ever noticed, by the way, how singularly appropriate a name Charles's *Chaplin* is for that inexhaustibly melancholic and unworldly joy of the universe? Whatever he wears, he always *appears* to be in dead black, and his face looks out like a Child of Mercy from fold upon fold of dingiest crape. What a Hamlet, what an Iago awaits his enterprise! Anyhow, the sight of that cousin of his twenty-times-removed down there, stepping between the flower-bushes under the emerald-studded poles and blood-red branches, had a slight flavour of the preternatural. The warmth of the sun too was beginning to dwindle and evening was coming on. That afternoon I ventured no further—merely waited until my phantom was well out of hearing before I got into John and Flora's two-seater again and started up the engine.

All that evening—windows wide open with their gauze casing to the lofty pillared porch of the house, I sat reading and at the same time thinking of that strip of railroad-track and the odd creature in the gully. I rather fancy I dreamed of him most of that night.

Happy and copious as ever, the sun rose again next morning, and by two o'clock in the afternoon I was well on my way to my trysting-place. A little reflection had washed out the grotesque apprehension of the day before. None the less, when I got to the end of the wheel marks left by my car on the previous day, I had a good look round before I ventured down into the gully. Once there,

on I went. It was impossible at any moment to see more than thirty yards in front of me, because of the winding of these narrow valleys between their hills. The line had evidently been laid for the conveyance not of animate but of inanimate matter.

I had gone about a mile or so when a little clicking noise in the distance broke the hush. I at once scrambled off the track into the cover of the trees, and waited. It may have been the dislodging of a stone or the crack of a dry stick I had heard, for in a while two figures appeared: my friend of yesterday and an old stooping negro with a sack on his back. Age has particularly tragic effects on the black: his almost greenish cheeks were sunken in, his lamb's-wool hair was nearly white, he had a hump on his back, and his long flat feet brought him along with a sort of shuffling trot, for his companion was making no allowances.

He himself was in the cloak and hat of yesterday; a man, I should guess, of about thirty-eight to forty, sallow, beardless, with a high nose and a stoop. His eyes were unflinchingly fixed on the ground, and I wondered if he would notice any signs of a trespasser. While within hearing this oddly matched pair exchanged not a single word. I watched them out of sight and went on.

The track at last twisted almost at a right angle, and I found myself surveying what might have been a natural break in the hillside, and what were clearly the relics of an abandoned quarry. And a little this side of its further horn I saw a house. Like all solitary houses, it stood up there in the silence under the blue-bowled sky mute with its own story. Its front side was at an angle with me: it was sideways on, I mean. The few windows I

could see were shuttered; its timbers dangled with leafy wisps of brilliantly-dyed creeper—vines as they are called more picturesquely over there.

It was a house of three stories, rather lanky in look; its blue paint was faded, though it showed no traces of decay. None the less, it had a deserted, almost forlorn appearance. Indeed with that semi-precipitous background, and beneath its fringes of gaudy woodland, it was exactly the species of house one would expect to find as the terminus of a dismantled railroad—a railroad obviously intended for the conveyance of the stone, or whatever it might be was quarriable, among these hills.

There was a something else in the aspect of the house a good deal more difficult to describe, though this effect may in part have been retrospective. It looked (I can't quite explain it) as if it were the headquarters of Somebody or Something. It looked like an old woman with vanishing tinged-up traces of the beauty she once enjoyed—as if it had had a past. Indeed I should guess it was well over a hundred years old. Apart from that—as if the lady still insisted on dressing to her past—the flat ground in front of it was densely carpeted with convolvuluses (Morning Glory): a living mat of a myriad tiny silent trumpets; bright blue, red, purple, slashed, striped, parti-coloured. A ravishing sight to see!

I stayed there, drawn back a little out of view of the windows, watching the house for some little time. A few large black heavy birds, of the crow kind apparently, were circling sluggishly over the trees above. There was no particular reason to hesitate to go on, and "Trespassers will be Prosecuted" is a sign that one sees far less rarely in America than "Live wire: keep off!" But if the four

last words had been scrawled up in paint on the nearest tree they would not have seemed inappropriate. Indeed if I had supposed the gentleman in the cloak was within, I should have turned back. *He* looked inhospitable. But he was safely "out" it seemed, and for at least half an hour or so. So at length I went on.

Taking into consideration what I am going to tell you in a minute or two, it is proof of the solitude and isolation of the house that when I came round to the further side of it, past the main porch, there was an open door; and just within, on a table, were a few pieces of old silver and of oriental porcelain that would have made a Duveen's mouth water. They looked singularly incongruous, somehow. And still there was no symptom or rumour of life whatever, though near-by stood a shed containing an immense heap of pumpkins, beside which lay an old bridle and a bill-hook.

There could be no harm in enquiring my way and asking for a drink of water. I rapped on the open door, and waited. Beyond it was a narrow staircase; but not a picture on the walls, not a shred of carpet on the boards. After waiting a few minutes I edged in a little, and peeped into a room. That, too, was empty, except for a rusty stove and a bowlful of brilliant fairy-like miniature gourds on the chimneypiece, as gay as a child's paint-box. Curtains, quite clean, and yet as if they had come from Nottingham twenty years ago and had been undisturbed ever since, hung at this window. This was evidently an entrance seldom used.

Not a sound came from within, and at last—it was my first attempt at housebreaking, and I still blush for it—at last I could resist the temptation no longer. After

one hasty glance outside to make sure that master and man were not returning, I crept rapidly up the stairs. To this moment I can't conceive what induced me to make such a venture. The call of the wild, I suppose!

The first flight gave only on to shut doors, and for the moment I dared not risk opening any; but continued the ascent instead. And at the top of the next flight I came to a room that was evidently a man's room. It contained some old bits of rather uncouth but pleasant Colonial furniture, and a good many books. If the house had any central heating apparatus it was evidently not yet in use; the room was coldish. Shutters were over one of the windows, and it smelt stuffy and of old cigar smoke.

It was nevertheless a pleasant and well-proportioned room with a curious air of serenity in spite of the gentleman who some sixty or seventy years ago had painted the portraits on the walls and had achieved only daubs and caricatures. There were four or five of them at least, and they looked across at me with a fixed unsmiling astonishment, and a mute "And who are you?"

Some primitive embroidery and Indian beadwork lay here and there, and over the fireplace another strip of it. At the further end of the room was a door ajar. This evidently led off to the rest of the house, but at this —at my—end of the room, and not three paces away, was yet another door opening inwards and partially concealed by a sort of old dresser with a few books and knick-knacks on its shelves. This had been drawn aside and not replaced. My heart gave a thump or two at sight of it, for as likely as not someone might be sitting within

—and what reception would he be likely to give an interloper like myself? Still innocence is innocence all the world over, and can be brazen at that. Again I listened, then stepped across the faded carpet, tapped, paused, and looked in.

I found myself on the threshold of a room in area about six yards or so by four, and low-ceiled. Its walls were roughly whitewashed and there was but one half-obscured window, over which gauze mosquito frames were fixed. It was cold, still, and empty: except that in each of the four corners of the ceiling a small gilded seraph in rough carved wood hung suspended with outstretched wings. The bowed heads of these seraphim were directed inwards towards a gilded image of the sun in the midst of the ceiling, its rays radiating outwards, like the design on a mariner's compass. There was but one piece of furniture in the room—a table, and in the centre of it was what appeared to be a plain ebony box inlaid with silver and ivory.

I stood in that twilight with eyes fixed on this small box—the distant whirring of the grass-hoppers in the flowers and sand below the only sound to be heard. The secret, the kernel, the meaning of these peculiar surroundings must lie concealed in this box, I thought. It fascinated me.

Influenza (have you ever noticed it?) is apt to leave behind it a phlegmatic audacity. One does not seem to mind much what happens next; because, I suppose, one's nerves are fatigued and yet excited after its dose of poison. But this situation in any circumstances was out of the common—that abandoned track, the exotic details,

the huge fall of rock, the faded ungainly house amid its marvellous carpeting of convolvulus. And at last, this shrine.

Remember, too, that I was a stranger and that this was Virginia; the old old Virginia of Raleigh and the plantations, of Old Joe and the minstrels; of the aristocratic, defeated, gallant, romantic Southerners! A nobler spirit than mine would, of course, have at once withdrawn in shame and regret at such a trespass, such sheer effrontery. Instead, still intent on the slightest whisper of sound in the house beneath me, I stepped over, laid my fingers on the ebony case and lifted it.

It was as though at a gesture I had pushed aside a tiny shutter between this world and Paradise. Instantly the room in which I stood was suffused to its uttermost angles with a gentle unsurpassable radiance—a radiance of a faint lovely lilac-blue, resembling in colour the flickering summer lightning one occasionally sees in our English thunder-storms. How much of this effulgence was its own and how much a condensation of the twilight from the muffled window I cannot tell; but it proceeded, at any rate, from a diamond that now lay revealed in the middle of the table on its low carved ebony stand. It was a diamond in size and shape rather like a flat-ended apple—flat at the base, I mean; and in its cutting a blunted cone.

Well: I never hope to make you realise the curious solemnity of this experience. Without much "fire" or coruscation this marvellous gem icily burned there—burned there with its own imprisoned radiance and with borrowed reflections of the waning day. It shone so softly it might have been asleep. And as I watched it

lying there in the midst of the wooden table, not a thought entered my mind except that of its surpassing beauty in this plain whitewashed setting, mused over by its guardian seraphim and plumb beneath that raying outspread sun. Maybe, apart from the fact of its mere actuality, there was nothing very remarkable in this; even a green field in sunshine wears an almost incredible radiance, and human faces now and then seem to be illuminated as if from within. Even the plainest and commonest object is capable of a seemingly miraculous metamorphosis, given the moment of insight.

However that may be, without realising it, I must for a few moments have slipped into a kind of trance or daydream in mere contemplation of the thing. *Sum-m-ject* and *om-m-ject,* as Coleridge used to say: here we were: *en rapport.* Neither then nor since, I may as well tell you, have I for an instant coveted to possess that object. There is a limit even to the instinct of acquisitiveness. You might as well plot to embezzle the evening star.

Well, there I stood, all but lost to my surroundings, and lost to shame; and, in this condition, low and soft yet quite distinct, I heard the sound of a voice near at hand yet as if out of nowhere. It was addressing *me.* It had said, "Hands up!"

On my honour, I assure you, just like that. In a low, even, unaffected tone: "Hands up!" Almost as perfunctorily as one might call softly to a child, "Take care!" or to a friend (if one were less fastidious in the use of English than you are), "So long!" For an instant I suspected that the conscience which makes cowards of us all had been the victim of an illusion. And then,

still with the wooden case between my fingers, I turned my head over my shoulder and saw a woman standing in the doorway. *Saw* her, indeed!—in that light!

She looked rather taller than she actually was, maybe because the faded blue dress she wore with its full skirts fell to her ankles. Her face was long and narrow, with high cheekbones; her hair, smooth and parted in the middle, was of a dull gold and tied in a knot at the neck. Beneath it, over blue eyes steadfastly fixed on mine, arched unusually dark eyebrows. These, too, and her eyelashes had a little gold in their dark, like that of her hair.

For moments together we gazed at each other eye to eye—utter strangers, yet sharing the common memories of all humanity. And in her hand—and quite in the approved fashion of the "golden remote wild west"—she held a small but effective-looking revolver.

It is curious how flatly one reads of these lethal weapons—Brownings, Colts, and suchlike—in a newspaper. As a literary device they were long since exhausted, but yet no melodrama, no movie, is complete without them. I remember one even in one of Henry James's stories, and incredibly odd it looked in the environment of his style. None the less, when such things actually come poking into one's private life, the novelty is complete.

On the other hand, I can honestly say that I was not in the least dismayed or alarmed. I suppose the summons of those quiet lips had conveyed to my mind no active meaning—and that in part maybe because that summons had been so remote from my personal vocabulary. But only in part, for immediately after that prolonged

exchange of looks between us, there was in a sense no need to understand it. Our spirits, our revenants, our secret sharers, or whatever one means by such words, had exchanged greetings in *their* secret tongue; and further explanations would be but without need.

There we were, we two human beings, in by far the loveliest place I have ever seen on earth, beyond change, beyond decay, its beauty awakening only incredulity and wonder in the presence of this miracle of serenity and light. What on earth at such a moment could anything *practical* matter—even a bullet in your stomach. Mere self—that horrible Ego one talks about, perched inside one, like the blackened anatomy of a crow—seemed to be of no importance. I was hardly even thinking. I glanced at the sinister little round black hole of the revolver and then looked straight up again into this stranger's face, and knew I was smiling.

The one thing I hesitated to do, queerly enough, was to hide the thing between us from view. I realised instinctively that any such action would put the two of us on an entirely different footing. At present we were quits, so to speak; discoverer and discovered; hunter and quarry; pilgrim and priestess. *Then* she would have the supreme advantage. For after all, mine was the most abjectly contemptible "case."

Instead, I put the box down on the table beside the precious stone, and began to explain myself. I told her precisely how I had come to be found there in these—compromising circumstances. I nodded, still smiling, at the jinnee on the table. It was unlikely I should wish to run away with *that,* I explained. I was completely at her mercy, of course, and under her orders. But . . .

Remember, too, that she too was *there*—in that particular place, and in those particular circumstances; and therefore of a curious loveliness, though she was no longer young. Indeed any object, living or inanimate, rare or common, could not but be transmuted, essentialised, in that gentle lustrous light. And I realised not only that she was not now thinking of the situation in itself, but also that my account of myself was now of minor importance. Even further—she was not in the least concerned I could see, with what I should like to call the sanctity of the place. An odd word to use, perhaps; but still, I stick to it. Yet as for me, so for her, this experience was something entirely unforeseen; even though she must again and again have rehearsed in fancy a similar eventuality. But it had never been one quite like this. In that at least we were at one.

"You are not an American?" she questioned me—her first question. And she still kept the revolver in true alignment. "You are English?"

This surprised me, for I had not yet observed in any of my remarks to her that anything was "nice" or "awfully jolly." And most English visitors in America suppose that such little peculiarities as these betray them.

I explained that I was on a visit; that I had come along the little railway.

"What for?" she said.

My shoulders shrugged themselves of their own volition, but I managed to suggest that my presence there was chiefly due to curiosity—to curiosity and delight in the beauty of the American countryside as it showed to an English visitor who had never so much as dreamt of its existence. Then again the derelict track and this house

—her house; its effect, its atmosphere. It had resembled the experience, in the gray of night at sea, of looking up across dark dawn-lit tumbling water, and there! an abandoned ship floating above its shadow, almost within hail; appealing, mysterious. I agreed that this was chiefly because I was a stranger to her part of the world; and added, "a queer kind of stranger, too." Then I remarked once more that the house was fascinating.

"Fascinating!" she echoed, listening to me with intense attention; and there was more in the cadence and timbre of the word than a whole sheet of this notepaper could express. It suggested to me that she was desperately sick of the place; that she longed to be quit of it; that she loathed this secluded life; that she was all but beyond being delighted or surprised by anything. At least, that is how it seemed to me at the time. And it filled me with dismay. I realised at once that *her* light, at any rate, had for years been unintermittently concealed and (as she supposed) wasted. All this, of course, passed only vaguely through my mind at the moment, but it was true, none the less. Her square masterful hand dropped to her side, and the full faded blue skirt at once concealed it, and what it held.

"If my husband had found you here like this," she went on in restrained and slightly trembling tones, "I doubt if you would have got away again. So far as I know—apart from ourselves and our two old negro servants—there isn't a living creature on earth who has seen *that.*" A barely perceptible shrug indicated what she referred to. "He does not wish it to be seen." She said it as if it were an edict of the Cæsars. "I don't see why you came here at all. What right have you? But never

mind. He hasn't seen you yet. And I shall take the risk of not telling him. And you meanwhile—well, I am assuming that you, on your side too, will say nothing of all this; of what you have seen. But that being so, we must—I must—talk to you again. No visitors ever come here; though occasionally we go into the town. But when I was small, just the first eight years of my life, I lived in England. And so——" She took a deep breath and broke off—a blank desolation had swept gently over her face. Her eyes looked at me almost as if she were frightened.

These were not her actual words, of course; they are only the nearest I can get to remembering them. But I remember *her*. We had remained in the same position while we had been talking—she in the doorway, I at the table, the wooden creatures above us concentrating their gaze upon us both. I remember how low we kept our voices, and the queer physical and mental restraint that seemed to have come over me, due in part, no doubt, to her unusual personality.

But only in part, for meanwhile the unwasting radiance of that other inmate of the room seemed to be conferring a curious saliency and meaning on even the commonest object within its "sweet influences." It was as if the light it shed were a kind of divination. For after all, the meaning and beauty of anything depends on who is looking at it. Imagine an intelligence resembling in its serene lucidity that stone! Imagine what this life on earth would be to us humans if never sun or moon or star had been in heaven to stir its dark. I can't put into words what I mean; but in a sense surely the light of the mind and that of the world without are in definite rela-

tion one with the other, and in a sense interdependent?

Whether or not; this particular radiance patterned the rough distemper of walls and ceiling behind the pendant images with the loveliest of coloured shadows, softly transmuted their faded gilt, revealing even the knots and graining of their wood, and that of the painted window-frame. It glowed softly on every several thread of a spider's web that hung from tip of seraph's wing to cornice. All this—the very texture of that threadbare blue dress—seemed to be symbols of an indecipherable yet enthralling message. As for the wearer of that dress, I seemed to be gazing at her far rather as though she were a work of art than one of nature—the tiny arch of her lip, the curve of her nostril, the line of eyelid and temple, the sheen of her eyelashes, and every facet of the cut-steel brooch of coloured gems she wore at her breast. They had become manifest and significant in a fashion that—well, only Rembrandt could tell you how.

No portrait I have ever seen bears comparison in memory with that solitary figure. Yet it was not her own beauty that was the marvel. My eye travelled in fascination up and down the double row of little pearl buttons that decorated the border of her bodice, and I sighed. Even the criss-crossed cotton with which they had been sewn on seemed to be letters of some secret rune.

Smile on, sardonic creature; but you'll agree that it's difficult to describe a state of mind. We went on talking after that almost like casual visitors at a religious ceremony, and, on my part, not wholly unconscious of the indecorum in so doing. She was asking me questions, chiefly, I fancied, to gain time while she continued

to reflect on other matters. Anyhow, she showed little interest in my replies to them. At last there came a pause. She turned her face away towards the gauze-blurred window—the marvel of merely watching her there: the translucent eye-ball, the capable hand now visible again, the arch of the head, the golden separate hairs! The very thought of interruption at this moment of utter serenity filled me, with dismay. But there!—however closely I try to put the experience into words, something remains that evades me. I can merely hint at it. An unknown power or presence was between us compared with which we were objects no more no less meaningful than were those dangling wooden seraphim compared with our own sensitive and miraculous humanity. My God, how we have debased and defiled even the fountains of our nature. What fools we humans are in our anxious restlessness of mind and body. Only still waters reflect the skies.

"I think perhaps you had better go now," she said presently, as if half to herself. "Would you please cover the thing up, and we will arrange when and where we are to meet again."

She turned back on me. "You see, it would at least be as well for you to hear definitely if my husband finds any evidence of your having been here."

It was sheer bravado, of course, but there was nothing to reply to that except that I was perfectly willing—even eager—to await his return. She looked fixedly at me, and gently shook her head.

"Better not," she said, and for the first time smiled. "That would be four to one." The words haunt me.

But then so too do those of "O Keith of Ravelston, the

sorrows of thy line!" and so too do "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang," and so too do "Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young." What are we to make of ourselves while we are the slaves of such incantations as these?

There was no need to argue the question. And yet, I wonder. I replaced its ebony hood over the diamond as you might place a rusty extinguisher on a guttering tallow candle; and in that moment it seemed as if all interest, life and reality had vanished out of the room. In the dingy blur of the window the gilded images still showed faintly, but their office was gone, and the ceilinged sun became slightly Frenchified and vulgar in effect. We ourselves had returned to the condition of just two ordinary human beings, self-conscious, slightly compromised, so to speak, who yet seemed to have passed through an overwhelming experience together. That at least was my impression. I cannot even guess how much of it she shared.

I followed her out of the room, shut the door, pushed back the old dresser into its place, and she led the way downstairs. At the foot she bade me stay where I was for a moment, and went out. The melodrama was over; the limelight had been extinguished, and these were the jaded wings.

I stood there looking out of the doorway. A change had passed over the scene in my absence. The sun was gone; it must by now be nearly set. The matted carpet of convolvulus showed only a surface of sombre green and gray; every gaudy little trumpet having wreathed itself into an everlasting silence, its day ended. It was absurd; but at sight of them (their beauty gone but their

true creative service beginning) a sort of disillusionment and regret came over me—that I had ever been decoyed not only into trespassing in these particular wilds, but into the world at all.

I got back to John and Flora's before nightfall; meeting not a single human being on the way. My solitude seemed insipid and fatuous. I loafed from room to room in a fit of mental and spiritual indigestion. What I wanted of course was to talk to somebody, but my only company was the black butler, and he met every attempt I made at conversation with little more than an inexhaustibly genial but vacant grin.

John was nothing much of a bookman, and Flora confined her reading chiefly to fiction; and I searched their shelves in vain for any monograph on precious stones. But since then I have read the subject up a little. It is worth while solely for its own sake. The giants of the species have had alluring names, and many of them such bloody and romantic histories they might well have been the creation of the evil one.

But I might as profitably have remained resigned to my native ignorance. Not one of my specialists made any attempt to *explain* the human lust and infatuation produced by such baubles. It cannot be merely on account of their beauty and rarity? Hardly. Burton, as usual, blows hot and cold in turn. "'That stones can work any wonders let them believe that list . . . for my part I have found no virtue in them.'" On the other hand, "'They adorn kings' crowns, grace the fingers . . . defend us from enchantments . . . drive away grief, cares, and exhilarate the mind.'" He mentions in his inimitable fashion the sapphire, too, that mends manners; and the

cheledonius (found in a swallow's belly) that makes lunatics amiable and merry. But concerning the diamond he is mum.

Browne is even more disappointing, merely citing (in order to dismiss it) the vulgar error that a diamond may be "made soft, or broke by the blood of a goat." Charming speculations; but alas, the mystery remains. Personally I detest diamonds. They are hard and showy. They give any young and lovely human creature an air of meretriciousness; and merely serve to disguise and conceal the old and ugly. They price their wearer, and only the evil come alive in their baleful company. But I must cut this cackle—with the warning, a trifle late, perhaps, that this adventure of mine is nothing of a story. Like life itself, it will come to a full stop, but not to be continued in our next. Never mind. I want to get through with it.

In the small hours that night—and my windows were thickly curtained—I discovered myself lying wide awake in bed, the room an oven, my mind swept and garnished, my body in a cold sweat. I lay, staring up into the dark, and the enormity of the evening's adventure swept over me. Like a cadging thief I had crept into what I believed to be an unprotected house, had made an impudent attempt to explore it, and had been caught in the act by an armed female. Vanity writhed within me like a wounded worm. The whole experience in those few hours of sleep had withered and rotted away like Jonah's gourd; had become utterly vulgarised.

In cowardly self-defence I began to consider the motives of my strange lady, and to speculate on the value

of her charge. And once you invite the spectre of money, or of distrust, into your drowsy mind, not only sleep but the most precious ghost that's in you at once decamps. The very hint of money is in some degree destructive of one's peace and poise of mind. So at least it seems to me. Pay a man in kind—do you find him *gloating* on his earnings. Would the Hope Blue Diamond —that fragmentary frozen lump of violet light—have sent quite so many victims to a quick end if all that could be got in exchange for it had been beef and potatoes?

The Young Man in Holy Orders, for example, stooping in ecstasy over the dewy mould under that bottle-glassed wall that wondrous summer morning—was his soul's quarry only what the Rajah's heirloom would bring in hard cash? Didn't his aspirations reach out from cash to kind, from symbol to substance, and then on to symbol again? Not that R. L. S. was much concerned with such niceties in that particular context. That's what I enjoy in him. He tells *stories;* and he is only off and on a casuistical Scot. He amuses himself.

Let us get back to Virginia. For hours that night I tossed about in John and Flora's swans'-down guest-bed, prostrated with humiliation and chagrin. How much simpler, how much more restful an eventuality it would have been if my "armed female" had been the kind of "vamp" one would cheer to the echo in a detective story —a vamp decoying me on in order to give that wide-hatted husband of hers and the old negro a chance of digging my last resting-place under that tangled mat of wild convolvulus? But no; a cemetery with more headstones even than geraniums is likelier to be my final goal.

In actual fact she had accompanied me a few hundred yards beyond the house, to see me on my way. Not a breath of wind had stirred between earth and evening sky. And apart from the chorus of grasshoppers the only sound that broke upon us, shrill and liquid—was the voices (I suppose) of the old negress singing in the backward parts of the house over a tub of washing. It was like a scene from a book, from an old Kentucky ballad. At times I wonder if the whole thing is not merely the memory of a dream. I wish it were.

My companion, during the few brief moments of our walk together, had seemed to be thinking—closely and rapidly. Now and again she turned as if to look at me or to speak to me, but desisted. I realised how anxious she was that I should keep my appointment with her; and yet just then was baffled to see why. It was not, I feel sure, from any want of confidence that her secret was safe with me. And on my side—well, my midnight ruminations were made none the happier by my implicit trust in her.

We arranged that she should put a couple of stones in a certain position near the furthest wheelmarks of the car. "Turn back at once," she insisted, "if they are not there." This was her last injunction. She looked me steadily in the face without offering her hand—her eyes as serenely clear with inward depths and distances as the evening sky itself—and we parted.

I had failed to tell her how little time was now left to me. John and Flora would be back on the Tuesday morning. In decency I could not stay beyond the Wednesday. Think of it!—to have to pack up my grip, go off

on my travels again, and become a normal sociable being in a black bow and a Tuxedo after such an experience as that! It was mortifying to the last degree.

It is still more mortifying to realise now that this experience is to all intents and purposes *finally* over, that I haven't the faintest desire to see the place again—the house I mean. I am not sure if I should ever have wished to think of her there—growing old, growing listless, resigned. My mind becomes stupid and useless the moment I begin to reflect on this. Nor is it only because of what has happened since. The whole thing has slipped into my imagination, I suppose; and the imagination, as you yourself once observed, retains essences, not mere tinctures. And yet the whole experience remains not only a mortifying but a horrifying memory. If it is not absurd to say so—it terrifies me with its perplexity. I could never be "happy" about it, even if—but wait.

I started off the next afternoon—it was a Sunday, of course—some hours later than before. This bothered me a little because it would entail my returning after dark. And though my road by now was fairly familiar, it would be none too easy for me to pick it out in the dark. As you know, I am little short of an idiot at finding my way. It would be nothing but a nuisance just then to have to spend the night in the woods, and there were excellent reasons for not converting the car into a travelling pharos on my return journey. So I kept a sharp eye on the road's turns and twistings, and having left the car some little distance down the hill, I followed the path past the track in the ravine, found the pre-arranged signal, and pushed on until I came to a semi-circular break in the

woods, well above the precipitous descent at the foot of which was the house. By craning forward a little under a weeping willow I could now get a glimpse of one corner of its roof.

The evening was twin-sister to its predecessor—as quiet as a peep-show. Another sun-drenched day was drawing to its end—a day that throughout its course had remained so serene and still that one could with ease have counted the leaves that had fallen since its dawn. It was fascinating to stare at that edging of roof, realising that beneath it was concealed a magnet potent enough to enslave every desperado and cut-throat this wicked world contains.

The lady was late but made no comment on that. She appeared quietly at my side and must have ascended the ravine by some path unknown to me. For a moment or two in her odd way she looked at me without speaking while she recovered her breath. She was without a hat, and wore the same faded blue gown that had haunted my miserable dreams in the dark of the night before. She was naturally pale, though her skin was slightly tanned; and she held herself upright as if by conscious habit. And if she looked at one at all, she turned her head completely to do so—never glancing out of the tail of her eye. Throughout her brief talk I detected no single wile or trick or hint of the ancient feminine—which is intended neither as a compliment nor the reverse. One merely gets accustomed to things.

Even in that dying twilight she looked a good deal older than I had assumed her to be. Her face was one you find yourself speculating about—exploring—even while you are actually talking to the owner of it: those dark,

straight eyebrows; the wide, light, open eyes; the gold-streaked hair. A longish face, and not easily "read," explored, analysed.

It seemed, too, to be strangely, incredibly familiar to me. It was as if we had lived together, she and I, for years at a stretch, had parted and had now met again after a prolonged absence; and yet as if that meeting had been a bitter disappointment and disillusionment. I cannot account for this except by supposing that into a moment of acute sensibility—some sudden drop of the mind into the deeps—one may condense a prolonged experience. Imaginatively exhaust it, so to speak. That few instants' intimacy had been too much for human nerves and hearts. I felt desperately listless, yet afflicted and aggrieved. Circumstances had betrayed me; I had turned from the first to the last chapter of my tale of mystery and somehow its glamour had gone. How can I explain myself?

Circumstantially all had been well. Her husband had noticed nothing amiss. "And even *live* men sometimes tell no tales, it seems!" she faintly smiled at me. "I believed you would come, and yet—well of course I could not be certain if I should ever see you again."

We sat down awhile in that tepid air, beneath the brilliant but now darkened autumnal branches, and she told me her story in her own languid, uninterested, broken fashion; our voices falling lower yet when, presently after, we rose again and wandered on a little further up the hill until at last we could actually see through a crevice of the trees (though we ourselves remained hidden) the window of the sanctuary itself.

It was an outlandish story, and, like the one I am telling

you, of the "shocker" variety. But I have no reason to disbelieve it. It would never occur to me indeed to mistrust a single word she uttered. There was a tinge of the sleepwalker in all she said and did.

The house, it seemed, had been built by the grandfather of the present owner, a quixotic creature who had fought —and fought fiercely—in the Civil War. He was killed early in '65, leaving an only son, a boy of sixteen or so, though how this youngster had himself escaped being roped into the army even at that early age I don't know. Until then he had been left in charge of faithful negro servants at home. The family was old and well-to-do if not wealthy, but even before the war had been slipping into the shade.

The boy's grandfather had formerly owned a large property further south with its usual complement of slaves, but had lost most of it by sheer neglect and by reason of his habit of wandering off on long and apparently aimless journeys over the countryside. He seems to have been a natural vagrant—in search of Mecca, maybe.

On one of these expeditions he had chanced on this ravine. Its beauty and isolation alone might have been fascination enough, but there was also apparently something in the soil that attracted his attention, and he discovered too that this particular "desirable site" had once been the scene of a violent convulsion of nature, during which it welcomed a visitor more alarming (though less extensive in effect) than Columbus himself.

An enormous meteorite had found here its earthly abiding-place. I suppose such things are not so rare as

one supposes. There must be scores of them in the oozy bed of old Ocean. There is a famous one, isn't there, in the wilds of Arizona?

It was his son, who, some time in the 'eighties, succeeded at last in blowing a huge fragment of this meteorite to smithereens with a stick of dynamite. No one seems to have had an inkling of what he hoped to discover in its entrails. What he did discover, however, brought his labours in this world to an end. Up till then the ravine had been used in a modest way as a stone quarry; hence the low-gauge railway. After the night of that explosion the industry ceased—for the owner of it had disinterred from amongst the slag and refuse left by his experiment the diamond down below. It must have been a queer and shattering moment. The effect on him seems to have resembled that of a wild Southern love-affair; it changed his complete existence.

At that time the lady's husband must have been a boy in his early teens, and had already as a child been initiated into the company of this peculiar prey in what I gathered was little short of a religious ceremony. I can see it too, the narrow, dark, pallid boy open-eyed in the radiance, and the father (to judge from one of the portraits I saw) of the Old Abe type—an early "highbrow," with a beard. Oddly enough I heard nothing of the mother, but whether or not she or any one else knelt there with these two at that ceremony, I wish Vermeer could have been there to paint it. This boy, no doubt as time went on, came to think of the stone as a kind of symbol of the Lost Cause—and of *his* lost cause. Some ghastly shock to nerve and mind during the war had intensified an hereditary bent and left him a prey to intense melancholy

and depression. It was he who had found for the gem its wooden sentinel seraphs and had hung up that sun in the shrine I have described. It seems to have become a refuge for his tormented spirit, the holy place not only of this indestructible emblem and of the ravaged South, but of his own half-broken insatiable spirit and possibly much else besides.

I can just imagine how in these surroundings and with his temperament it must have vivified and infatuated that languid and rich Southern imagination which even to this day has never broken fully into flower. Fantastic, I admit. But remember that this thing was literally exterrestrial, a visitant from the wilds (or the serene) of "space," of the unknown, of the dreamed-of. Nowadays we rap on a table and are presented with ectoplasm and similar evidences. On the other hand, all pioneers, surely, in their exploitations even of the material world have had *some* twist and contortion of fantasy in their minds. This one's delight and desire were not in the gross world of the senses but in the regions of the mind. He had turned contemplative. It is easy to mock at him shut up up there, in the silence with his talisman for whole nights together—the solitude, the intense heat of summer, the icy gales of winter in that aloofness from most of what we mean by life. But in such times as ours is it worth while?

That black-haired creature then in saturnine cape and hat whom I myself had seen glide like an automaton into view and glide out of it again on the abandoned track had sucked in his father's superstitions with his milk. His mind had been doubly dyed. He still secreted an implacable abhorrence of the North—an attitude, surely, nowadays only very faintly shared by any other living

creature. But this was but one peculiar ingredient in the make-up of his extraordinary consciousness. Some day I will tell you a little more about him; but I doubt if my informant for an instant realised how queerly many of her intimate confidences that evening fell upon that cold calm Englishman's ear.

While she talked, I listened and mused. It would be agreed I suppose that the winning side in that cruel and bloody Civil War had not hidden its own bright particular gems under a bushel. It has surged on from strength to strength. It has more diamonds to show than Beezlebub has flies. None the less even to-day in that vast half-ravished country of theirs there must be scores of half-hidden Koh-i-noors still waiting to be shared around—natural resources eagerly expecting the rap of some millionaire Moses's rod to pour out their abundance into the lap of these Nordic adventurers. Our own potentialities are now less abundant. It is a remarkable phenomenon. It sets one thinking—the problem, I mean, of hoarding versus exploiting; the problem of spiritual intensity versus material enterprise; of imaginative intuition versus man's mere reasoning powers. It sets me thinking of my own part in that afternoon's adventure. That inescapable law—the immutability of one's past!

Down there (as we sat in our moment's peace together,) down there under cover of this shag of dusky woodlands lay concealed this incredible bauble which, if it emerged into our civilised world, would instantly knock the bottom out of the diamond market, and would awaken in scores of human hearts the vilest passion of which they are capable. There may be nothing much in that. But why should the mere memory of it have affected the very life

and light of *me,* have sunk deep down into the depths of consciousness wherein all our "longings, dreams, and aspirations lie." What strange inward radiance had shone on me that solemn hour? The problem—absurd though it may sound—continues to enthral me.

I stirred and looked round at her. For the moment I had not been listening. Perhaps that dark Edgar-Poe-like creature was even at this moment at his orisons! Night had been advancing while we talked and a stealthy moon-pale radiance lay over the wooded landscape spread out beneath us. And still this lady's low uneven voice in her peculiarly tortuous manner continued telling me her outlandish story, though I knew in my heart that she was sick to death of the whole business. For her its interest had long since worn through and was now worn out. The situation had become an unendurable burden and obstacle.

On the other hand, her mind was still obviously dominated by the presence and influence of her husband; though I rather doubt from what she said—mere inference of course—if she had ever been for more than a little while in love with him. The momentary bonfire had burned itself out or been swiftly extinguished, and she had slipped apparently into the part of the childless mother, with this egocentric fanatic for *protégé.*

That is the position as it seemed to me then, as on reflection it seems to me now. Not that her husband was stark staring mad, only a little crazy. There are too few of his kind in this world. I wish there had been an opportunity of meeting the creature. Like nature with her sunsets, life, it seems, is beginning to mimic man's movies. The more I think of it, the more melodramatic the situation becomes. I hate fingering over, as Keats says,

other people's domesticities. But it was plain from what she told me that for many years past a silent, continuous, but none the less embittered war of the spirit must have been raging between these two poor human derelicts.

Maybe she herself was a pace or two over the borderland. Like most people who are accustomed to solitude she would now and then forget as it were to go on talking, her eyes fixed meanwhile as if in reverie or in contemplation of some thought or feeling which she was anxious but loth or unable to express. Her eyes indeed had that half-vacant look in their beauty of those who daydream. They seemed to divine rather than observe. And though she uttered no word to suggest she was unhappy, the tones of her voice, every instinctive gesture of her hands, told the same tale. There are sorrows and misgivings in every mind which we as human creatures shrink from revealing—that of growing old, for example; of falling short of one's poor best. But this was a canker much nearer home even than these. It was at her heart. She had been "confined into a cage" and had long since begun to realise what that means—even though freedom might prove nothing but a treachery and a delusion. Then, suddenly, had appeared this interloper from the great Outside—and had reminded her of her childhood and of England.

I see as I write the troubled simplicity that lightened her face as she spoke of it. The very ghost of childhood returned into it. Her own small daughter, if she had ever had one, might have looked like that—the young moon in the old moon's arms. Not, I suppose, that I am to blame for that, any more than the executioner's axe is to *blame* for the mute head in the basket of sawdust.

She has had her revenge, too; for now as I sit here, wasting my time and all this ink, and return in fancy to her Virginia, "my heart aches and a drowsy numbness fills my sense, As though of hemlock I had drunk." It is useless to attempt to follow the inward workings of one's mind. All may seem quiet, and in repose there; and then you realise—by the weedy flotsam, the rollers, the screaming of the birds and the wreckage—the storm that is now over. However that may be, it is nothing but the truth to say that the faintest memory of her Virginia —the mere sound of the word makes me as homesick as a cat. Homesick, and I know not what else besides.

She can't have foreseen that. I must have appeared repulsively cold and indifferent—but I hope not mistrustful. You appear what you feel, feign as you may. I had butted in, then; unforgivably if you consider how. But apart from that, and far worse, it became clearer and clearer to me while we talked or sat silent that she had seen in me her long-deferred opportunity to escape. It was the fate-ordained saviour come to rescue her from the island on which she had been so long marooned. Even to suggest the faintest consciousness of such a thing may seem incredibly raw and ugly, if not worse. But there it is. Remember too, that the actual rights and wrongs of the problem did not so much as even arise. Maybe I should not now be loathing myself like this if they had. Yet it is not exactly cowardice that kept them back. All I can say is that I listened to these undertones in a fever of disquiet and perplexity.

I listened; but after all, the thread that skeins up even the most sophisticated heart is tied only with a slip knot. And how I wish I could give you the faintest

notion of the marvel of that scene and night. The first thin silver of a crescent moon had come into the sky low down in the West and was being dogged by a planet glassy as a raindrop by candlelight. The blue above our heads was of a depth and brilliance that no Chinaman even has succeeded in putting on paper or clay. And there was I —the doors of understanding, of compassion, even of mere humanity shut and bolted—gently, insistently temporising; and she zigzaggedly insinuating her long-suppressed desires, aspirations and anxieties into my mind.

"What is he going to do with the thing when he goes?" I croaked at last. Can you imagine a more idiotic question in the circumstances? Think how it might have been taken! But the faintest subterfuge was impossible to her. She did not "take it" at all; she replied as simply as a child that the diamond was to be buried with him: "interred with his bones"! He had long since arranged, it seems, that the two old servants who from his infancy had watched over him as closely as guardian angels, were to dispose of his body so that not even the privy wolves of Hatton Garden could dig it up again. And Providence itself had made this possible.

There was a crevasse a few hundred yards beyond the valley beneath us. The meteor had at its impact split earth's shallow, brittle crust, and this was the scar. Drop him and his charge into that, down there—well, it would be a final exit for them both.

Time was flitting by and darkness had come before we rose from where we had seated ourselves at the edge of the track. The thick dust muffled our footsteps; the languid sweetness of the autumnal air was still resonant with the clashing cries of tiny ardent creatures exulting in their

brief moment of life. My companion seemed to be in no apprehension of being missed from the house. It was her custom to wander in these solitudes alone in the evening.

I think of her there in the earlier days when love and marriage, when that tranquil shrine of light and loveliness, and these hills and unravished valleys were still new to her and still seemingly inexhaustible in romance and delight and promise. But now . . . For twelve solid months, she assured me, but one single stranger, and he only an enterprising hobo, had come their way; and hoboes prefer a different welcome from the one this particular hobo received. Twelve months: to her of waste and weariness; and I—I would all but sell my soul for but one week of it!

Well, there is no more story left. She asked me, she seemed to expect me, to come again the following evening. And I hadn't the courage to tell her it would be my last. I half-promised to do so, realising none the less, I know, that it *was* only a half-promise and without much genuine intention behind it. What could I do? What purpose would there be? I have asked myself the question a thousand times. I am sick of it.

You yourself, I am sure, would vouch for my staidness and respectability even to an Income Tax Inspector. But then you are a seasoned sophisticated wretch. You enjoy looking at life steadily, especially when its back is turned. But what, say, of Blanche? What would she have said, do you think, if, like the Good Samaritan I had brought the lady home in my hold-all? But that, yet again, does not arise. The one and only question that does is this: What kind of *me* was there for por-

ter? My old jaded mind is utterly incapable of anything that America would recognise as ordinary hospitality. And there is a hospitality of the spirit.

You will notice I am facing the delicate situation not exactly with *sang froid,* but with a hideous insensibility. I am not intending that. I am trying not to excuse, not even to explain, but to express my feelings *then*—the most obvious being that I hadn't the faintest wish in the world to enter that secret shrine again and to stand beneath that gilded sun. The mere thought of it was distasteful to the last degree. It had been an "event" in my uneventful existence—an initiation, a mystery, if you like; and it was over.

But apart from that, I see now (though not then, I swear) that other hidden door, ajar: that other shrine and gilded sun; enraying the secrecy of this desolated creature's mind and heart. Whatever, too, I may have said to the contrary, her company was strangely moving, strangely exciting. And I mean the company not merely of her mind and personality, but of her body. There was something in her face, her talk, her presence, that suggested an infinity of interest and suppressed activity. Some human beings are not merely intensely life-giving; but one realises that the mystery of them is infinite —their reserves. You never get to the end of them. They may say the same thing a thousand times and it is always different. A Will-o'-the-Wisp or a Kindly Light, whichever it may be, leads you on.

I guessed too, vaguely, the hoard of day-dreams and speculations which she was keeping back, which she could not express or had not the heart to express; which yet, given the opportunity, might have found their ease and

happiness. Let me, at risk of banality and worse, be even more explicit. It was as if we two, for the century of a passionate moment, had been in love, and that in that moment I myself had exhausted that strange and terrifying experience. And then—then, not now—so far as I was concerned, only ashes, ennui, disillusionment. And yet, I blame it less on myself than on the stone—its dream, its nightmare. And how could I justify that—say, to an English jury? It's monstrous I should be writing like this; but it must stand.

"You will be going back to England soon?" she said to me after a long pause, and when we were about to say good-bye. I nodded, listening on and on to the broken syllables of that "England"; and once more silence edged in between us. Her face was close to mine in the dark. I was conscious of her breathing, that tears were in her eyes; conscious too of that other vision of her during the few minutes that had transcended these as manna transcends unleavened bread. If only the sistermeteorite of that ravished visitor below could at that instant have descended out of the intense inane and blotted me out.

We parted. I did not go back. There was no opportunity unless I had positively wrenched one out of the preposterous circumstances in which I was placed, and at instant risk of discovery. She would have bitterly resented any suggestion that I should share her confidences, however trustworthy the confidant. That was certain. I could not even send her a word of explanation or of apology. There was no address. What she thought of me during the weeks that followed I can only guess. It does not much matter now, does it?

As a matter of fact, it was only by chance I ever heard

of her again. The day before yesterday there came by post, from Flora, a newspaper already a fortnight old. She had marked in it a column containing the account of a tragedy that had recently taken place "not many miles distant from us." She thought I might be "interested" in it, as the people concerned, though unknown to her personally, were neighbours of hers—as neighbours go, that is, in Virginia. Interested!

There is no mistaking who these neighbours were. Having paused over its headlines, read the cutting I enclose and tell me what you think of it, and even what you think of me too if you feel inclined and have the patience. I can only assume that the one death was not self-inflicted, assume that—well, as I say, read it.

To me the worst horror of the account is not so much that my visit may have been the occasion of some fatal quarrel, but that that old, hump-backed, graying negro was all but lynched on account of it, and that he died of the shock. But not, I gather, before he had consigned his master and his miserable talisman to the abyss prepared for them. I see it, shining there through the ages with only those mouldering bones on which to waste its paradisal radiance, that eyeless skull. But there is an eye of the mind, and mine is still awake. Centuries hence, when we and all we stand for may in turn have become "prehistoric," other "humans" may find it there. What will those humans be like, I wonder—mind and body? What will be *their* reactions to the fire and lustre and communings of the thing?

But, as I say, I am sick of the whole experience and of its faintest remembrances. It has been an inexpressible relief even to rid memory of it like this, to express

it as plainly as I can. At thought of it my mind becomes like a sucked orange. *"'Traditore!'"* Do you remember the old gentleman in *The Pavilion on the Links? "Traditore!"* And yet, Why? What actually did I do or leave undone that sickens me so? What was there in this unintelligible ordeal that still eludes me?

Three or four evenings ago a friend of mine nearly suffocated me with the strains of a gramophone record. It was Alma Gluck who was singing; accompanied by a male chorus resembling molasses and rum. And the tune was:—

"Carry me back to Old Virginny
Dats where de cotton" [*and the words elude me*] "grow,
Dat's where de birds warble sweet in de Spring-time . . ."

But then, I was never in Virginia in the Springtime . . .

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